SOCIAL SUPPORT, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN
COHOUSING COMMUNITIES: A MIXED-METHOD ANALYSIS

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Social Sustainability, Social Capital, and Social Support:
An Interdisciplinary Review and Conceptualization in Light of the
Cohousing Model of Community

Abstract

This interdisciplinary review and synthesis explores the related but distinct concepts of social support, social capital, and social sustainability within a feminist ecological framework, and examines Cohousing as an innovative model of community which may support social well-being at multiple levels of the ecological system.
The current literature review and conceptualization examines the related concepts of social sustainability, social capital, and social support in the context of the cohousing model of community from an interdisciplinary, integrative perspective. Reviewing and then connecting a wide range of topics, it draws from the distinct traditions of sociology, counseling psychology, and community psychology in order to explore and connect these related concepts. The feminist ecological model is utilized as a theoretical framework for grounding the multilayered nature of the analysis.

First, the cohousing movement and community model is introduced and described, with history, relevant literature, and recent research reviewed. Second, the discipline of community psychology and the feminist ecological model are introduced and reviewed with the intent of providing an organizational structure within which the concepts of interest are contextualized. Next, the phenomena of social sustainability, social capital, and social support are each introduced, defined, and reviewed in light of both historical and current literature, theory, and research, with special attention given to applications to the cohousing model. Finally, gaps in the literature are explored, and a rationale and foundation for the proposed study of social support in cohousing community members is offered.

**Introduction to Cohousing**

Fromm (1991) conceptualized “community” as a group of people joined by a common belief or purpose, which frequently includes social contact, influence, fulfillment of needs, and sharing a common history. The concept of *intentional community*, then, is aptly named: it
implies a community conceived, manifested, and maintained around specific, articulated goals, values, purposes, and patterns of behavior which are chosen and upheld by its members. An intentional community is “a group of mostly unrelated people living together and dedicated by intent to specific common values or goals” (Meltzer, 2005, p. 2). Cohousing, as a specific model or type of intentional community, has emerged over the last several decades, and has spread rapidly throughout the United States and Europe, becoming the one of the most established forms of intentional community in existence today. The following section introduces cohousing, briefly explores the history and principles which underlie its presence in the US, and reviews the research conducted on cohousing to date.

The cohousing model originated in Denmark in the 1960s, and was brought to the US by Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant with their foundational book, *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* (1988). In this text, they describe the physical, economic, and social structures which are carefully integrated to create this unique intentional community, and advocate for its implementation as an alternative to the isolated, nuclear-family-based, urban/suburban communities which have become the norm today. There are at least 120 existing cohousing communities in the United States, with many more in the planning/organizing phases. Many more exist in northern Europe (300+ to date), and communities are rapidly emerging in Australia, Asia, and other sites around the world.

Durrett and McCamant (1994) outline six distinguishing characteristics of cohousing, which provide a solid framework for differentiating cohousing from cooperatives, kibbutzes, communes, and other forms of intentional community:

1. Participatory process: Residents typically take active roles in visioning, designing, developing, and manifesting their own cohousing community.
2. Neighborhood design: Although physical designs vary greatly by region and setting (rural, suburban, urban), vehicles are typically kept on the perimeter of the community, allowing for an internal corridor, street, or other open area which is safe for children and utilized as an interactive community space.

3. Common facilities: The “common house” typically refers to a large, shared space containing cooking/dining facilities and other community facilities (laundry, exercise rooms, children’s rooms, TV room, etc). This forms the physical context for community meals (typically occurring 2-3 nights/week), meetings, and social activities.

4. Self-Management: The residents of cohousing take responsibility for designing, managing, protecting, and maintaining all physical and social elements of the community. Committees and work groups form to provide for specific community needs, and participation in such meetings is expected of all able members.

5. Absence of hierarchy: Decision-making in cohousing communities is almost without exception democratic, with consensus or partial consensus emerging as the most commonly-used process strategy. It should also be noted that cohousing does not imply a shared spiritual path (as might be common among the communes of the 1960s), shared education of children, or the presence of a charismatic leader around which the social mores of the community are organized.

6. Separate incomes: Residents do not pool incomes, financial resources, or assets in any way beyond the agreed-upon contribution to facilities development and
upkeep. Cohousing communities typically include members of diverse occupational and income-level groups, along with varying lifestyles, cultural backgrounds, etc.

**Intentionality in Cohousing: Physical and Social Elements**

A defining feature of cohousing is its mix of public and private space, along with an intentional focus on creating balance between community life and the independence and privacy of its members (Meltzer, 2005). Individuals (and families) own private homes, which are fully self-sufficient (containing kitchens, etc), but share common facilities, often including a large kitchen, dining room, laundry room, guest rooms, offices, child-oriented spaces, studios or wellness spaces, etc. Some communities (those in rural areas) also share extensive outdoor facilities, including gardens, animal husbandry spaces, trails, ponds, and undeveloped land, while other (typically those in urban areas) occupy no more space than the average apartment building.

Turning briefly to the disciplines of urban planning, architecture, and design, the New Urbanists support a theory which maintains that recreating the physical characteristics of traditional villages and residential communities will eventually lead to the kind of social connectedness and supportive interaction that towns and villages historically enjoyed (Katz, 1994; Langdon, 1994). However, a critical evaluation of such projects quickly reveals the flaws with such environmental/architectural determinism; merely creating the physical space is far from sufficient to promote the development of community and social connectedness that it seeks to create (Poley, 2007). On the contrary, Torres-Antonini, Hassel, & Scanzoni (2003) suggest that this philosophy of expert-designed physical determinism represent a narrowing of our understanding of the development of true community, and actually poses obstacles to the birth of the community connectedness that we seek.
Poley (2007) argues that while the physical/architectural design of the community is indeed important and can support social interaction, it is rather the intentionality around social design and the sustained, thoughtful engagement with the values/processes/goals of the community which creates the true community which cohousing seeks to foster. This sentiment is echoed by one cohousing resident who spoke to the elements which differentiate cohousing from other designed/planned residential communities:

There are condos built in my area that by site design, are like cohousing. They have pedestrian orientation, a common house, pathways, even the picnic tables on the grassy commons which each unit views. These places on paper would be reasonably well designed cohousing developments, in practice they are not cohousing. Why not, what is the difference? The people who live there are strangers to each other, and have little interest in changing that. To me, a key part of cohousing is: The intent is to enhance community among people who are neighbors and to create relationships among themselves that are supportive and mutually satisfying. (McCamant et al., 1988)

More important, then, than the physical space and facilities, is the intention held by community members towards creating and maintaining a sense of community. About half of extant communities have a written mission statement or statement of values, which outlines the principles, agreements, or tenants which guide their commitment to creating community intentionally (Meltzer, 2005). Members meet frequently to manage the considerable logistics (finances, labor systems, etc.) of running the community, meeting the needs of various members, and facilitating socially connective and supportive events and behaviors. Most communities incorporate intentional, planned social structures (such as community-wide shared meals and
work-days) into their community, which foster social connection and the building of social capital. Speaking to both the physical design and the social norms which support the development of community in cohousing communities, Poley wrote,

Social contact design principles underpin the creation of a centrally located common house as a regular feature of cohousing neighborhoods. Cohousing social norms support the practice of making one or more community meals available in the common house per week. The structures of community governance and management provide the means by which residents organize themselves and confer responsibility for ensuring that community meals are regular, attractive to residents, and well organized. Regular, enjoyable community meals draw residents out of their homes and into interaction with one another. Over shared meals, residents communicate and build relationships. Information about neighborhood, local, or national issues is routinely shared at meals. Opinions are exchanged. Resources are identified. Ideas are hatched and tested. Plans are developed. Commitments are made. Activities are organized. (2007, p. 158)

Origins of and Motivations for Cohousing: Macro-level and Individual-level Motives

In an attempt to explain the origins and motivations behind the emergence and rapid growth of cohousing across the world, Meltzer (2005) pointed clearly to widespread senses of lack of meaningful social connection, discontent with ‘community’ as it was experienced, and a striving for an alternative which would better meet our human needs for connection. He wrote that cohousing arose “in precise response to perceived social problems of the late twentieth century- personal alienation and the breakdown of community” (2005, p. 3). What is this
“personal alienation and the breakdown of community” of which Meltzer speaks, and which has prompted the development and rapid spread of cohousing as an alternative to conventional housing/community structures? Scholars from various traditions (particularly sociology, psychology, and history) have offered conceptualizations of this phenomenon.

One of the earliest of such conceptualizations was put forth by the “father of sociology,” Emile Durkheim. He introduced and popularized the concept of “anomie,” which he defined as the breakdown of social bonds between the individual and their communities, with an accompanying fragmentation of the individual’s social identity and a growing sense of alienation and purposelessness (1893). He explained that traditions such as religion and other highly prescriptive forms of social ritual (and vehicles of social control) often provided the basis for a sense of identity, shared values, and meaning which he saw as being eroded and weakened over time. This, he explained, led to an absence of the shared values or standards which underlie the individual’s sense of well-being and meaning in life, and was responsible for many of the social ills of the time. Later, Robert King Merton further developed the concept of anomie, proposing “strain theory,” an expression of the discrepancy between social ideals/goals and the availability of legitimate means to attain these goals (Agnew, 1992). A related and more contemporary analysis of these issues is offered by Putnam (1993; 2000), and is discussed at length within the later section on social capital.

Turning from this societal, macro-level interpretation toward the more individual, micro-level reasons and motivations for joining a cohousing community, the work of Sullivan-Catlin (1999) suggests that although there is significant variation in individuals’ and families’ reasons for choosing cohousing, several common themes have emerged. Using in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis to explore individuals’ motives for joining community, Sullivan-Catlin
explored the following questions: First, what motivates people to become involved in the cohousing movement? What is the role of personal biography (particularly gender and geographical location) in individuals’ motivational priorities? Her findings suggest that dissatisfaction with mainstream housing options (in particular, feeling that the classic American suburban lifestyle is “isolated, overly-consumptive, and lacking in a sense of community”), and dissatisfaction with alternative housing options including cooperative houses and communal living situations (citing high rates of turnover, a lack of privacy and personal space, internal conflicts, hierarchical leadership, ideological elements, and differing levels of financial commitment as problematic issues) were both strong motivators for individuals to seek out and explore the cohousing model. She also found that individuals frequently articulated being drawn to specific elements unique to the cohousing model in particular, and reported both social needs (friendship, sense of community, etc.) and instrumental needs (labor, child care, practical support) as emerging frequently as strong motivators for individuals. Intriguingly, she found that men were more likely to emphasize the importance of social and community-based elements of cohousing, and women more frequently emphasized the instrumental, practical advantages of living cohousing. (In particular, she found that women who were parents of young children and working at least part-time (and frequently full-time) were most likely to report the availability of instrumental support as central to their interest in cohousing.) Her findings highlight the importance of looking at individual factors (along with broader historical, socio-cultural factors) when examining the motivations for choosing the cohousing model, and shed light on some of the most common reasons for exploring this alternative housing arrangement.

Having introduced the cohousing model, reviewed the relevant literature, and examined (briefly) the sociological and individual motivations which underlie its emergence, we turn next
to an interdisciplinary theoretical grounding of the current synthesis and analysis, beginning with community psychology and the feminist ecological model.

**Community Psychology and the Feminist Ecological Model**

A longstanding critique of the field of psychology suggests that it is overly focused on the experience, personality, and function (or dysfunction) of the individual, to the exclusion of the social/political/environmental communities and contexts in which we are inextricably grounded. Community psychology as a sub-discipline seeks to address these largely neglected spheres of influence and interaction, but frequently struggles to accomplish this with the level of sophistication and multidimensional awareness required to conceptualize the complexity of human and environmental systems. Ballou, Hill, and West (2008) articulated this shortcoming clearly, and called compellingly for a revisioning of psychology and of the lenses and models through which we understand the human experience. Out of this critique (based in feminist, critical, multicultural, ecological, and systems-based theories) was conceived the Feminist Ecological Model, which serves as a theoretical foundation in which the current analysis is grounded.

Below is a brief review of community psychology, an overview of the feminist ecological model, and a contextualization of the current study within these nested layers of theoretical and practical conceptualization. Within, the intention is to connect the current study (social support in cohousing) not only with laterally relevant research (social support, individual mental and physical health) but also with the related and relevant interdisciplinary constructs of community, social capital (sociology), and social sustainability (ecology, politics, sociology, etc.).
Community Psychology

Community psychology is fundamentally concerned with social and community well-being (and problems), and the ways in which social systems affect the lives of individuals. Dalton, Elias, and Wandersman (2001) point out that the title “community psychology” may seem contradictory, given psychology’s nearly exclusive focus on the individual (cognition, motivation, development, behavior, etc.) in contrast with the interactive, group-neighborhood focus of “community.” Accordingly, they offer the following definition: “Community psychology concerns the relationships of the individual to communities and society. Through collaborative research and action, community psychologists seek to understand and to enhance quality of life for individuals, communities, and society” (2001, pp. 4-5). Their emphasis on the interaction between the individual and the community underlies both the beauty and the complexity of community psychology; observing, measuring, and intervening in such interactions is notably nuanced and difficult work!

Community psychologist Kenneth Heller offered a particularly poignant encapsulation of the interactive, complex nature of community psychology and the importance of its contribution to the field of psychology. Speaking of the work of psychotherapy/counseling, he wrote,

Our professional traditions tell us to attend to symptoms of depressed affect, such as the number of days when it was hard to get up in the morning, and to ignore signs of political apathy, such as the number of years of not registering to vote. We ask about queasy stomachs, sleepless nights, and family conflicts, but not about feeling safe in the streets, the number of persons on our block that we know by first name, or the availability of recreational centers for teens . . . My point is fairly straightforward: not asking about community structures reflects our
theoretical biases which, in turn, defines the domain of relevant inquiry. . . The study of community structures will become part of our professional agenda only when we expand the conceptual templates through which we view the world, and we come to believe that community structures are modifiable and worth our collective effort. (1989, p. 12)

**Feminist Ecological Model**

The feminist ecological model (Ballou, Hill, & West, 2008) draws on the work of Bronfenbrenner (1977;1979) and offers a nuanced, inclusive, and flexible conceptualization of multiple spheres of influence at individual, community, societal, and planetary levels. Drawing from multicultural theory, critical theory, systems theory, ecological theories, and feminist theories, its originators expanded upon Bronfenbrenner’s early model of interactivity and multiplicity, incorporating broader cultural, structural, and pervasive demographic factors. The model attempts to represent the many dimensions of real-world complexity: multiple levels of knowledge and experience, multidirectional interactions between individuals, communities, and contexts, and the influences of direct, indirect, proximal, and distal influences on human experience and development.

The model consists of a series of concentric circles or rings, each of which is bisected by the coordinates of race-ethnicity, class, sex-gender and age. The center ring of the model represents the level of the individual. As Ballou, Hill, and West (2008) clearly describe, our psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, and humanistic psychologies all find their roots at this level, conceptualizing both problems and solutions as residing squarely within the individual. The feminist ecological model seeks to broaden our understanding of the individual, incorporating intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual elements, and emphasizes its
irrevocable interaction with the other levels of the model and the coordinates of race-ethnicity, class, sex-gender and age. For the purposes of the current study, social support (reviewed in greater detail in a later section) is conceptualized (and measured) as a critical, individual-level phenomenon.

The second concentric ring represents the Microsystem, which encapsulates elements of the individual’s immediate environment with which he/she interacts on a daily, face-to-face level. For a given individual, this may include the family, the school system, places of employment, the social community, and local government. This may also include the residential community or neighborhood, social groups and organizations to which individuals/families belong, systems of childcare, food preparation and sharing, etc. For the purposes of the current study, social capital is conceptualized as a critical community-level (microsystem) phenomenon.

Moving outwards in this system of concentric rings, the exosystem represents the next broader realm of influence, and consists of institutions at regional, state, and national levels. This includes educational, religious, professional, and legal institutions which aim to oversee the interests of the public and provide broad structures around which microsystem-level institutions are organized. The outermost ring of the feminist ecological model is the macrosystem, consisting of broad structural and environmental forces including values, worldviews, human rights, and the global interactions of resources, power/politics, and economics. As always, the important consideration here is not only the nature of the exosystem or macrosystem, (supportive vs. hostile, oppressive vs. just, etc), but the interaction between the individual and the exosystem/macrosystem: the complex, multidirectional interplay of effects and responses which continue throughout the individual’s lifetime. For the purposes of the current study, social
sustainability is conceptualized as a critical society-level (exosystem, macrosystem) phenomenon.

Turning toward the pervasive coordinates are drawn into the model and which cross all levels of influence, we find sex-gender, race-ethnicity, age, and class. These demographic characteristics emerge as important signifiers of experience across all of the concentric rings or levels of experience, and interact constantly with other forces to create life experience. That is, the individual’s experience of the micro, meso, exo, and macro-systems are filtered through the individual’s age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and sex/gender, and are framed/experienced/shaped accordingly.

The feminist ecological model serves as a theoretical foundation for the current study by providing a framework for contextualizing social sustainability, social capital, and social support. Representing similar constructs at different levels of the ecological model, these three constructs emerge as nested and hierarchically linked critical variables in the current analysis of cohousing. Although the current study involves actual measurement of social support (an individual-level phenomenon), an understanding of the role which this construct plays at broader levels of the model (social capital, social sustainability) is essential to a multidimensional, nuanced analysis of these issues from an ecological perspective. Having thus introduced the feminist ecological model and briefly reviewed the way in which it contextualizes the current analysis, we turn next to the macro-level, micro-level, and individual-level phenomena of social sustainability, social capital, and social support, providing a more detailed review of each concept and a discussion of each in the context of the cohousing model.
Social Sustainability

The term “Sustainability” has received increased acclaim, use, and international, interdisciplinary attention over the past several decades. Ecological sustainability, environmental sustainability, and economic sustainability are becoming household terms, and “sustainability” itself has become something of a buzzword for progressive development and policy-related advocacy. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development submitted a report to the United Nations which stated that sustainable human life and development requires concentrated and equal focus on social, ecological, and economic conditions via an interdisciplinary and international lens. The social element of sustainability is thus far the least developed, defined, and understood of this critical triad. Below, the concept of social sustainability is described and conceptualized (for the purposes of this study) as a critical society-level (exosystem, macrosystem) phenomenon, and its role in providing a theoretical basis for research on social support in intentional community is demonstrated.

The concept of sustainability is based largely in systems theory, which posits that our environment, economy, and social organization together form a larger system which can only function when each component element is functioning well (Harris, 2000). Focusing on the domain of social sustainability, several definitions and functional analyses of the construct have been proposed.

Dillard, Dujon, and King (2009) have framed social sustainability in terms of four universal principles (human well-being, equity, democratic government, and democratic civil society), and three traditions of inquiry (human-centered development, sustainability, and community well-being). Others have focused on equity, framing social sustainability as equal access to social resources within the current generation and across current and future generations.
Polese and Stren (2000) define social sustainability as “development that is compatible with the harmonious evolution of civil society, fostering an environment conducive to the compatible cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups while at the same time encouraging social integration, with improvements in the quality of life for all segments of the population” (pp. 15-16). More recently, the Western Australia Council of Social Services issued the following statement: "Social sustainability occurs when the formal and informal processes; systems; structures; and relationships actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and liveable communities. Socially sustainable communities are equitable, diverse, connected, and democratic, and provide a good quality of life” (2002, p. 7).

Although such strides are being made towards clear, if broad, definitions and conceptualizations of social sustainability, the tremendous scope of the issue creates significant difficulty for those attempting to create measures or scales of social sustainability. Koning (2001) spoke to the complexity of selecting appropriate indicators for monitoring and measuring social sustainability, particularly across cultures, developed and developing nations, and ecological environments.

Before exploring social sustainability in the context of cohousing specifically, brief mention is required here of the connections between social sustainability and social justice. Social justice emerges as a common element of each of the definitions of social sustainability reviewed above whether included explicitly or implied within terms such as “equitability,” etc. Social justice has moved to the forefront of sociological and psychological agendas over the past several decades, and represents an important issue of much interest (and concern) in academic, political, and community circles. Partridge (2005) suggested that these concepts are related but distinct, and wrote “I would suggest that the difference between social justice and social
sustainability is the ‘futures focus’ that is contained within the sustainability perspective. A
desire for sustainability by definition implies a concern with the future as well as the present” (p. 8).

**Social Sustainability and Cohousing**

Because social sustainability is understood as a society-level phenomenon (manifesting in
the exosystem and macrosystem of the feminist ecological model), it is not viable to “measure”
or assess the degree to which a given cohousing community possesses social sustainability.
Instead, social sustainability emerges as a large-scale manifestation of the smaller-scale
constructs of social capital (microsystem) and social support (microsystem and individual-level),
when they operate in concert with other sustainability-related economic/legal/cultural principles.
That said, several studies have touched on social sustainability (or closely related issues) in the
context of cohousing.

Frisk (2007) studied sustainability in cohousing communities, comparing a conventional
neighborhood with a cohousing community across a range of variables (including social,
economic, and environmental indicators). Gathering survey data, she explored the consumer
behavior, social behavior, and environmental behavior of respondents. Her data relating to social
sustainability suggested that social support and social capital (defined in the context of Putnam’s
[2001] work on the concept) are both strong indicators of environmental awareness and
involvement, and that social, environmental, and economic indicators of sustainability were
related and reciprocally activating within the cohousing community studied.

Meltzer (2005) visited 18 North American cohousing communities, and gathered
tremendous amounts of both quantitative and qualitative data on the communities he studied. He
collected information of the demographic characteristics of cohousing residents, the physical
features of the communities, the environmental practices of residents, the use of resources and consumptive habits of residents, and the social and community-related norms of each community. The results of his analysis supported the hypothesis that living in community not only enhanced environmental awareness, but actually supported and increased residents’ use of environmentally conscious practices in everyday living.

Torres-Antonini, Hassel, and Scanzoni (2003) found similar results based on their study of one established, urban cohousing community. They conducted a focused case-study, visiting the community multiple times over a 12-month period, and examined both explicit and implicit mechanisms through which environmental practices (recycling, composting, etc) were fostered, encouraged, and shared among residents. They conclude that the dual concepts of “social intentionality” and “environmental intentionality” combined in a unique form within the cohousing community, and suggest that cohousing as a model is able to address both social and environmental values in a highly effective fashion.

Ultimately, Meltzer proposed a “Community Empowerment Model” (see image, p. 155), which represents a cyclical and iterative process in which different elements of the cohousing experience integrate ecologically to deepen both environmental and social community efficacy. Within this model, circumstance (defined as the external conditions, settings, and systems which may affect individual and community action) is designed to facilitate human interaction, which then builds meaningful and sustaining social relationships characterized by social support. The ongoing investment in these supportive relationships imbues individuals with a sense of belonging to the community, which leads to confident and sustained engagement in active pursuit of the community’s well-being and flourishing.
Similarly, the results of Poley’s (2007) study suggest that cohousing has the potential to serve as a viable and promising platform for fostering the foundations of social justice and social sustainability at the local, community-driven level. Outlining the ways in which cohousing accomplishes this, she wrote,

Cohousing challenges residents to step away from the dominant narrative of our culture as one composed of rugged individualists, jealous guardians of privacy and independence, and asks them to consider others and the disparate viewpoints they invariably represent, in their decision-making on everything from how to manage the family pets to whether it is appropriate to keep a gun in the house. Cohousing communities also expect residents to take responsibility for contributing personal time and resources towards supporting the life and well-being of the neighborhood and everyone in it. (p. 159)

For the current study, social sustainability is explored as the macro-level manifestation of social capital and social support, and includes issues of social justice, social connection, and environmentally conscious behaviors. Subsequent segments exploring social capital, social support, and other community-level and individual-level sociological and psychological phenomena are thus contextualized as micro-level building blocks of this broader concept and goal of social sustainability.

**Social Capital**

“Social Capital” was introduced into the scholarly literature as a sociological construct in by Bourdieu (1972), and gained popular interdisciplinary recognition with the work of Robert Putnam (1993). Borrowing from the economic conceptualization of “capital” yet speaking directly to the relationships, networks, and social norms which emerge within communities, the
term has been defined in several important ways. Bourdieu (1972) spoke of social capital as belonging to the individual, framing it as a sum of resources that accrue to an individual or a group through participation in a network of relationships. Portes defined social capital as “the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures” (1998, p. 6). Putnam (1993) was the first to conceptualize social capital as belonging to communities rather than individuals, and defined it as “features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (p. 167). Putnam later went on to focus on the values of social networks (highlighting reciprocity and trustworthiness), and framed these as both private and public goods, with positive externalities occurring as a consequence of the accrual of social capital (2000). He describes two forms of social capital: first, that with “bonding” or exclusive qualities, which tend to occur within homogeneous groups that reinforce exclusive identities (women’s book clubs, country clubs), and secondly, that characterized by “bridging” or inclusive qualities, which tend to engage and integrate individuals across diverse social realms (civil rights movement, service groups).

Several authors have commented on the use of economic language (capital) to describe social connections and resources, and highlighted the importance of drawing distinctions between the functional impact of social capital and that of the classically conceived economic capital. Unlike financial capital, social capital exists not in individual actors but in the relations between them, and in fact requires ongoing maintenance in order to retain its value. Perhaps most importantly, unlike traditional capital, social capital is not depleted by use, but is rather depleted by non-use. These important distinctions must be kept in mind as we consider the means through which social capital is measured, developed and lost within communities.
Decline in Social Capital

Putnam (2000) worked to find ways of measuring social capital, grappling with the significant challenges associated with measuring a construct which is neither clearly an individual-level nor a group-level phenomenon (Bankston & Zhou, 2002). He ultimately used 14 indicators of formal and informal community networks and social trust to compose the “Comprehensive Social Capital Index,” and (based on extensive survey research) concluded that social capital has declined precipitously in American communities over the past 50 years. He found evidence of reductions in community and organization membership, engagement in public affairs, community volunteerism, levels of trust in the government, informal sociability, and trust in neighbors and community members (2000). Others have found similar reductions in political engagement, associational membership, and generalized trust (Narayan & Cassidy, 2001; Paxton, 1999). Emphasizing the importance of understanding and publicly describing the phenomenon, Putnam wrote

The ebbing of community over the last several decades has been silent and deceptive. We notice its effects in the strained interstices of our private lives and in the degradation of our public life . . . Naming this problem is an essential step toward confronting it, just as labeling ‘the environment’ allowed Americans to hear the silent spring and naming what Betty Friedan called “the problem that has no name” enabled women to articulate what was wrong with their lives. (2000, p. 403)

Looking deeper into the roots of this cultural shift, Putnam argues that face-to-face interaction is essential to individuals’ ability to develop social trust, shared investment in community well-being, and collective confidence in shared ability to navigate difficult decisions...
and conflicts. He wrote, “to predict whether I am likely to give time, money, blood, or even a minor favor, you need to know, above all, how active I am in community life and how strong my ties to family, friends, and neighbors are” (2000, pp. 120-121). He went on to suggest that the presence of social capital is intimately related to the development of the skills and qualities on which successful democracy is based, and that the decline in social capital is cause for serious concern (1993; 2000).

**Social Capital in the Cohousing Context**

Although not a psychologist or primarily interested in individual-level effects, Putnam (2000) was not blind to the impact of social capital (or its absence) on individuals and families. He wrote, “Social capital also operates through psychological and biological processes to improve individuals’ lives. Mounting evidence suggests that people whose lives are rich in social capital cope better with traumas and fight illness more effectively” (p. 289). His research demonstrated direct relationships between social capital and student accomplishment, personal health, tolerance, and community safety (1993). Also highly relevant is Putnam’s finding that more than 80% of his 1999 study respondents felt that “there should be more emphasis on community, even if that put more demands on individuals” (2000, p. 29). The following section explores this phenomenon of social capital in the unique context of cohousing, and reviews key studies drawn from the psychological, sociological, and ecological traditions.

Poley (2007) studied social capital and the quality and quantity of civic engagement demonstrated within cohousing communities and among cohousing residents. Examining both the design (environment) elements and the intentional social practices and norms developed in cohousing communities, she argued that cohousing provides an arena for practicing and developing the skills of social capital-building and participatory democratic engagement. Her
results indicated extraordinarily high levels of civic engagement among U.S cohousing residents as compared to the general population (using national survey data for comparison), and demonstrated the ways in which cohousing communities build the “skills of democracy,” including engagement in community self-governance, consensus-based decision-making, and navigating complex, nonhierarchically distributed leadership structures. Poley argued that cohousing serves as an example of a community structure which builds social connections and social capital intentionally, as an integral part of its purpose, and demonstrates its success in accomplishing this stated goal.

Frisk (2001) found that cohousing members interacted significantly more frequently with their neighbors than respondents from a comparable conventional neighborhood, with almost 95% reporting talking or visiting more than several times per month. Poley (2007) cited regular community meals in particular as one example of intentional design which fosters this development of social capital, stating that

The civic and democratic benefits of common meals are but one example of the mutually reinforcing, catalytic relationship between the social contact design elements, the pro-social norms and the participatory governance structures that are characteristic of cohousing. The combination of these elements routinely creates incentives for increased engagement while simultaneously lowering barriers to entry, and transactions costs of such engagement for residents. In this way, this research suggests, an over-arching social structure is being created that makes regular, democratic engagement the path of least resistance for residents of cohousing neighborhoods. (Poley, 2007, p. 158)
For the purposes of the current analysis, social capital is conceptualized as a critical microsystem phenomenon, and is presented here in order to contextualize the current study of social support in cohousing communities. Koning (2005) articulated this connection best, and stating that “Connectedness, trust, reciprocity and exchange are the ingredients of the social relationships that lie at the core of social capital and either have a positive or negative impact on the outcome” (p. 12). Grounded thus in the connections between social sustainability, and social capital, we turn next to the individual-level construct of social support, examining this as the measurable, specifically psychological phenomenon serving as the focus of the current study.

**Social Support**

Individuals do not cope with the inevitable stresses of life in isolation; rather, we cope in relationships with others. Interest in and research on the concept of social support skyrocketed after it was noted that some individuals appear to cope well even with high levels of stressors, risk factors, and other factors typically predictive of negative coping and poor outcomes – and that these unusually resilient individuals tend to report high levels of social support (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2001). Accordingly, social support is most currently conceptualized as a complex “collection of social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes occurring in personal relationships that provide aid that promotes adaptive coping” (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2001, p. 234). For the purposes of the current study, social support is conceptualized as a critical individual-level phenomenon, representing the innermost realm of the ecological model.

The research showing that social support is associated with physical health and psychological well-being is overwhelming. Although a full review of this literature is beyond the scope of the current analysis (see review by Cohen & Wills, 1985), a brief overview of important
findings is included here. Social support has been found to correlate significantly with improvements in anxiety in adults and children (Barone, Aquirre-Deandries, & Trickett, 1991), depression in a wide variety of populations (Barerra & Li, 1996), and behavior problems in adolescents (Wills, Vaccaro, & McNamera, 1992). Social support has been found to predict overall well-being and reduced psychological distress in an ever-increasing variety of populations, including children and adults coping with bereavement (Sandler, West, Baca, & Pillow, 1992), college students (Liang & Bogat, 1994), and adolescents (DuBois, Felner, Sherman, & Bull, 1994). Social support has similarly been found to be related to improved academic performance (Zea, Jarama, & Bianchi, 1995) and improved parenting skills (Silver, Ireys, Bauman, & Stein, 1997). Looking specifically at physical measures of health, we find that social support predicts general health and correlates negatively with number of general health problems (Bates & Toro, 1999; Cutrona & Russell, 1990) and with cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune functioning in particular (Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser 1996).

In light of this overwhelming evidence that social support is intimately related to both physical and psychological well-being, the development of various theories of social support has been forthcoming. These theories attempt to answer a multitude of questions:

• How and why is social support predictive of positive outcomes?
• What forms do social support take? Is social support a universal, unitary construct, or is it divisible into a number of related components?
• How do individuals and communities develop social support?

Cohen and Wills’ (1985) foundational work on stress and social support examined two models of social support: the direct-effect model, in which social support is hypothesized to be directly related to the positive outcomes described above, and the buffering model, in which
social support is understood as protecting individuals from potentially adverse effects of stressors. They reviewed a number of empirical studies, and present evidence consistent with both of these conceptualizations of the links between social support and physical/psychological health. The authors concluded that the ways in which social support is measured (assessing specific, behavioral, global, and/or perceived support) impacts the way in which it is most clearly understood, and suggest that social support acts both directly and indirectly on well-being.

Sarason, Sarason, and Pierce (1990) conceptually divide social support into two categories. First, they describe generalized support as that which is consistent and ongoing, regardless of any particular stressor faced by an individual at a given time. This generalized support can be understood as consisting of social integration, a sense of belongingness, and as emotional support, comfort and caring provided within personal relationships (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). These belongingness and emotional support needs are met in a variety of social networks and community contexts, and it is this strong generalized support which provides the individual with a stable, longitudinal sense of security and social connectivity over time. The second type of social support (described by Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990) is specific support, which is a type of focused, directed engagement around a specific stressor, often linked with a particular setting or community context. This may include encouragement, informational support (advice or guidance) and tangible support, taking the form of concrete assistance or material resources (Cutrona & Russell, 1990).

Analyzing these different types of support in the context of different stressors or losses, Cutrona and Russell (1990) found that certain types of support were more effective or helpful than others for a given difficulty. For example, tangible support was most effective in supporting low-income individuals around issues of chronic financial strain, while encouragement alone was
found to be helpful in dealing with chronic work stress. Emotional support was most effective around issues of uncontrollable stressors, such as physical illness or caring for an ill family member, whereas a combination of support types is most helpful for bereavement or loss of a job. Based on these findings, they promote the optimal-matching hypothesis, which states that the most effective forms of social support are matched to or “target” the specific type of stressor or challenge being faced.

A recent study addressed the matching hypothesis in the context of social support and neighborhood community, focusing on the relationships between “neighborhood disorder,” depression, and neighborhood-specific social support (Kim & Ross, 2009). Neighborhood disorder has been defined as both a physical and social state of dis-ease, and reflects a perceived lack of order and social control in the community (Ross, 2000). Characteristics of neighborhood disorder include the perception of danger and lack of strong social accountability, crime, and lack of social connections between neighborhood residents. The link between neighborhood disorder and psychological distress (including depression and anxiety) has been well documented (Hill, Burdette, & Hale, 2009; Hill, Ross, & Angel, 2005). Grounded in social support theory and the optimal matching hypothesis, Kim and Ross (2009) sought to explore the protective effect of neighborhood-specific social support (support given and received between neighborhood residents) on depressive symptoms. The authors found that both general social support and neighborhood-specific social support were effective in buffering the effect of neighborhood disorder on depression, and suggest that greater specificity of measurement/analysis of different types of social support (practical, emotional, etc.) may be required in order to draw more focused conclusions about the protective functions of social support in this context.
Social Support in the Cohousing Context

Meltzer’s (2005) study of a broad sample of cohousing communities emphasized both social support and practical support as integral to the cohousing experience. Regarding social support, he describes the way in which such supports are not presumed to happen “naturally,” but are built into the intention and structure of the communities:

While most cohousing residents have intimate relationships with one or a few unrelated others with whom they can share personal problems, communities recognize that not all members are so connected. Hence, men’s, women’s, and parent’s support groups are common. Some cohousing communities have a committee for the purpose of addressing the personal needs of their members. Radically changed circumstance and emergency situations are often the catalyst for such support. Loss of employment may trigger a loan from an emergency support fund. Accommodation within the community will be found for one of a couple undergoing separation. A cooking roster may be developed to provide meals for a family in need. A single mother, for example, reported not having to cook for two months after the birth of her child. (p. 142)

Examining the exchanges of practical support, Meltzer found that practical support occurred constantly and in a myriad of formal and informal ways. He describes observing residents helping each other with house maintainence, childcare, computer problems, etc. – and wrote that “such mutual aid can save money, alleviate stress, and imbue relationships with substance. It is an essential ingredient of the ‘social glue’ of most cohousing communities” (2005, p. 142).
The above review of literature and interdisciplinary integration of the concepts of social sustainability, social capital, and social support is offered as a foundation and broad background for the proposed study of social support in cohousing.
References


Abstract

The current study examines the psychological phenomenon of social support in the context of cohousing communities, using a mixed method design to explore cohousing residents’ experience of social support and the role which social and community-related needs play in individuals’ choices to join a cohousing community. Interviews with ten cohousing residents yielded detailed accounts of motivations for seeking cohousing and experiences of social support in cohousing, and thematic analysis was used to explore explicit and underlying themes. These qualitative results informed the design of a survey, which was administered to 60 cohousing residents and 65 demographically similar individuals who were interested in cohousing but did not live in cohousing. Both perceived social support and behaviorally enacted social support were measured, and it was found that cohousing members both gave and receive significantly more socially supportive behaviors than their non-cohousing peers. In addition, cohousing members were compared to a matched set of participants in the 2002 and 2004 General Social Survey on items related to social support. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.
Social Support, Social Capital, and Social Sustainability in Cohousing Communities: A Mixed-Method Analysis

A longstanding critique of the field of psychology suggests that it is overly focused on the experience, personality, and function (or dysfunction) of the individual, to the exclusion of the social/political/environmental communities and contexts in which we are inextricably grounded. Community psychology as a developing sub-discipline seeks to address these largely neglected spheres of influence and interaction, but frequently struggles to accomplish this with the level of sophistication and multidimensional awareness required to conceptualize the complexity of human and environmental systems. Ballou, Hill, and West (2008) articulated this shortcoming clearly, and called compellingly for a revisioning of psychology and of the lenses and models through which we understand the human experience. Out of this critique (based in feminist, critical, multicultural, ecological, and systems-based theories) was conceived the Feminist Ecological Model, which serves as a theoretical foundation in which the current analysis is grounded.

The feminist ecological model serves as a theoretical foundation for the current study by providing a framework for contextualizing social sustainability, social capital, and social support. Representing similar constructs at different levels of the ecological model, these three constructs emerge as nested and hierarchically linked critical variables in the current analysis of cohousing. Although the current study involves actual measurement of social support (an individual-level phenomenon), an understanding of the role which this construct plays at broader levels of the model (social capital, social sustainability) is essential to a multidimensional, nuanced analysis of these issues from an ecological perspective. The current study examines the related concepts
of social sustainability, social capital, and social support in the context of the cohousing model of community from an interdisciplinary, integrative perspective.

Cohousing

Cohousing, a specific model or type of intentional community, has emerged over the last several decades, and has spread rapidly throughout the United States and Europe, becoming the one of the most established forms of intentional community in existence today. The cohousing model originated in Denmark in the 1960s, and was brought to the US by Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant with their foundational book, *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* (1988). In this text, they outline six distinguishing characteristics of cohousing, which provide a solid framework for differentiating cohousing from cooperatives, kibbutzes, communes, and other forms of intentional community:

1. Participatory process: Residents typically take active roles in visioning, designing, developing, and manifesting their own cohousing community.

2. Neighborhood design: Although physical designs vary greatly by region and setting (rural, suburban, urban), vehicles are typically kept on the perimeter of the community, allowing for an internal corridor, street, or other open area which is safe for children and utilized as an interactive community space.

3. Common facilities: The “common house” typically refers to a large, shared space containing cooking/dining facilities and other community facilities (laundry, exercise rooms, children’s rooms, TV room, etc). This forms the physical context for community meals (typically occurring 2-3 nights/week), meetings, and social activities.
4. Self-Management: The residents of cohousing take responsibility for designing, managing, protecting, and maintaining all physical and social elements of the community. Committees and work groups form to provide for specific community needs, and participation in such meetings is expected of all able members.

5. Absence of hierarchy: Decision-making in cohousing communities is almost without exception democratic, with consensus or partial consensus emerging as the most commonly-used process strategy. It should also be noted that cohousing does not imply a shared spiritual path (as might be common among the communes of the 1960s), shared education of children, or the presence of a charismatic leader around which the social mores of the community are organized.

6. Separate incomes: Residents do not pool incomes, financial resources, or assets in any way beyond the agreed-upon contribution to facilities development and upkeep. Cohousing communities typically include members of diverse occupational and income-level groups, along with varying lifestyles, cultural backgrounds, etc.

**Origins of and Motivations for Cohousing: Macro-level and Individual-level Motives**

In an attempt to explain the origins and motivations behind the emergence and rapid growth of cohousing across the world, Meltzer (2005) pointed clearly to widespread senses of lack of meaningful social connection, discontent with ‘community’ as it was experienced, and a striving for an alternative which would better meet our human needs for connection. He wrote that cohousing arose “in precise response to perceived social problems of the late twentieth century- personal alienation and the breakdown of community” (2005, p. 3). What is this “personal alienation and the breakdown of community” of which Meltzer speaks, and which has prompted the development and rapid spread of cohousing as an alternative to conventional
housing/community structures? Scholars from various traditions (particularly sociology, psychology, and history) have offered conceptualizations of this phenomenon.

One of the earliest of such conceptualizations was put forth by the “father of sociology,” Emile Durkheim. He introduced and popularized the concept of “anomie,” which he defined as the breakdown of social bonds between the individual and their communities, with an accompanying fragmentation of the individual’s social identity and a growing sense of alienation and purposelessness (1893). He explained that traditions such as religion and other highly prescriptive forms of social ritual (and vehicles of social control) often provided the basis for a sense of identity, shared values, and meaning which he saw as being eroded and weakened over time. This, he explained, led to an absence of the shared values or standards which underlie the individual’s sense of well-being and meaning in life, and was responsible for many of the social ills of the time. Later, Robert King Merton further developed the concept of anomie, proposing “strain theory,” an expression of the discrepancy between social ideals/goals and the availability of legitimate means to attain these goals (Agnew, 1992).

Turning from this societal, macro-level interpretation toward the more individual, micro-level reasons and motivations for joining a cohousing community, the work of Sullivan-Catlin (1999) suggests that although there is significant variation in individuals’ and families’ reasons for choosing cohousing, several common themes have emerged. Using in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis to explore individuals’ motives for joining a community, Sullivan-Catlin explored the following questions: First, what motivates people to become involved in the cohousing movement? What is the role of personal biography (particularly gender and geographical location) in individuals’ motivational priorities? Her findings suggest that dissatisfaction with mainstream housing options (in particular, feeling that the classic American
suburban lifestyle is “isolated, overly-consumptive, and lacking in a sense of community”), and dissatisfaction with alternative housing options including cooperative houses and communal living situations (citing high rates of turnover, a lack of privacy and personal space, internal conflicts, hierarchical leadership, ideological elements, and differing levels of financial commitment as problematic issues) were both strong motivators for individuals to seek out and explore the cohousing model. She also found that individuals frequently articulated being drawn to specific elements unique to the cohousing model in particular, and reported both social needs (friendship, sense of community, etc.) and instrumental needs (labor, child care, practical support) as emerging frequently as strong motivators for individuals. Intriguingly, she found that men were more likely to emphasize the importance of social and community-based elements of cohousing, and women more frequently emphasized the instrumental, practical advantages of living cohousing. In particular, she found that women who were parents of young children and working at least part-time (and frequently full-time) were most likely to report the availability of instrumental support as central to their interest in cohousing. Her findings highlight the importance of looking at individual factors (along with broader historical, socio-cultural factors) when examining the motivations for choosing the cohousing model, and shed light on some of the most common reasons for exploring this alternative housing arrangement.

**Social Sustainability**

The term “Sustainability” has received increased acclaim, use, and international, interdisciplinary attention over the past several decades. Ecological sustainability, environmental sustainability, and economic sustainability are becoming household terms, and “sustainability” itself has become something of a buzzword for progressive development and policy-related advocacy. Social Sustainability, I argue, is an equally important but poorly defined
and rarely studied element of the broader concept (and practice) of sustainable human living.

Dillard, Dujon, and King (2009) have framed social sustainability in terms of four universal principles (human well-being, equity, democratic government, and democratic civil society), and three traditions of inquiry (human-centered development, sustainability, and community well-being). The Western Australia Council of Social Services issued the following statement: "Social sustainability occurs when the formal and informal processes; systems; structures; and relationships actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and liveable communities. Socially sustainable communities are equitable, diverse, connected, and democratic, and provide a good quality of life” (2002, p. 7).

Because social sustainability is understood as a society-level phenomenon (manifesting in the exosystem and macrosystem of the feminist ecological model), it is not viable to “measure” or assess the degree to which a given cohousing community possesses social sustainability. Instead, social sustainability emerges as a large-scale manifestation of the smaller-scale constructs of social capital (microsystem) and social support (microsystem and individual-level), when they operate in concert with other sustainability-related economic/legal/cultural principles.

Social Capital

“Social Capital” was introduced into the scholarly literature as a sociological construct by Bourdieu (1972), and gained popular interdisciplinary recognition with the work of Robert Putnam (1993). Putnam (1993) was the first to conceptualize social capital as belonging to communities rather than individuals, and defined it as “features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (p. 167). Putnam later went on to focus on the values of social networks (highlighting reciprocity and trustworthiness), and framed these as both private and public goods, with positive
externalities occurring as a consequence of the accrual of social capital (2000). He describes two forms of social capital: first, that with “bonding” or exclusive qualities, which tend to occur within homogeneous groups that reinforce exclusive identities (women’s book clubs, country clubs), and secondly, that characterized by “bridging” or inclusive qualities, which tend to engage and integrate individuals across diverse social realms (civil rights movement, service groups.)

Several authors have commented on the use of economic language (capital) to describe social connections and resources, and highlighted the importance of drawing distinctions between the functional impact of social capital and that of the classically conceived economic capital. Unlike financial capital, social capital exists not in individual actors but in the relations between them, and in fact requires ongoing maintenance in order to retain its value. Perhaps most importantly, unlike traditional capital, social capital is not depleted by use, but is rather depleted by non-use. These important distinctions must be kept in mind as we consider the means through which social capital is measured, developed and lost within communities.

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improvements in anxiety in adults and children (Barone, Aquirre-Deandries, & Trickett, 1991),
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Goals and Directions of the Current Study

The above review of literature and interdisciplinary integration of the concepts of social sustainability, social capital, and social support is offered as a foundation and broad background for the current study. The issue of fundamental interest is whether living intentional living and community structures can facilitate higher levels of social support, social capital, and (ultimately) social sustainability. However, the magnitude of this question and the causal nature of the inquiry make it implausibly difficult address all elements within one study; rather, the scope of the current project has been confined to exploring the concept and experience of social support in the context of cohousing.
Given that social support is linked to physical and psychological health (and the development of social capital, which is linked to community well-being and sustainability), an exploration of those community structures which facilitate socially-supportive relationships is long overdue. The current study utilizes a mixed-method design to investigate whether cohousing members do, in fact, receive more socially-supportive behaviors, give more socially-supportive behaviors, and experience higher levels of perceived social support than comparable non-cohousing members.

**Method**

Prior research addressing this topic is largely limited to anecdotal, non-empirical sources of information. Because of this, open-ended, qualitative research is needed as a broad exploration of the topic, and as a basis from which to focus future work. On the other hand, the gathering and rigorous analysis of quantitative data would offer an empirical foundation for more focused examination. As such, a mixed-method design was selected, and is ideally situated to address these questions at macro- and micro-levels of the ecological system.

A methodological issue of concern is that of self-selection: those who live in cohousing communities have all chosen to live in community, and thus may have personal characteristics and/or values which predispose them towards developing more socially supportive relationships than the average individual. As such, it may not be the living situation which has caused cohousing members to experience higher levels of social support, but rather their innate interest in socially supportive community. Because of this potential confound, the comparison group of individuals who are *interested* in cohousing (as demonstrated in their participation in email listservs and attendance at cohousing-related events), but do not yet live in a cohousing community is included in the study design. Although the methodology is not sufficient to support
truly causal inferences (i.e., a randomized cohousing-assignment condition is not possible), this comparison/control permits the preliminary consideration of the impact of the cohousing condition on individuals’ experience of social support.

The current study aimed to gather data which supported the following research questions:

1. Do members of cohousing communities report engaging in more socially supportive behaviors than demographically similar North Americans?

2. Do members of cohousing communities report higher levels of total perceived social support (or particular types of social support) than established norms for a given measure of social support?

3. Do members of cohousing communities report higher levels of total perceived social support (or particular types of social support) than similar (on demographic and interest-based variables) individuals who do not live in community?

4. What is the relationship between perceived social support and behavioral measures of socially-supportive behaviors given and received?

5. Does perception of social support among cohousing residents vary by sex, age, status as parent/non-parent, or income/socioeconomic class?

6. What motivates individuals to choose a cohousing community? Does social support emerge as a primary factor? Do age, sex, or socioeconomic class predict particular types of social support needed/desired, or its role in motivating the choice in joining a cohousing community?

7. How has living in community impacted individuals’ perceptions of community and/or social support in their lives?
For the purposes of the current analysis, a combination of a semi-structured interview, a new scale consisting of items assessing socially supportive behaviors provided and received by the participant, and a measure of perceived available social support, were selected as a multidimensional, efficient, and comprehensive general measure of social support. Because of the mixed-method nature of this analysis, the methods are described in two parts. Part I consists of qualitative data drawn from semi-structured interviews with ten cohousing residents. Part II represents a quantitative survey-based data collection. All participants (for Parts I and II) were administered a demographic questionnaire which contains basic questions about age, race, marital status, education, income, status as parent/non-parent, and other relevant variables. All elements of this study were approved by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board.

**Part I: Semi-structured interview**

**Participants and Recruitment Procedures.** The participants for Part I were recruited using a national (USA) email listserv for cohousing members. The study was introduced as an exploration of social support in cohousing communities, and 10 volunteer participants were sought (no compensation was offered). Approximate gender balance was sought, and those who responded after the initial ten participants were politely declined. Interviews took between 30 and 65 minutes, with an average length of approximately 40 minutes, and were conducted via telephone. Interview conversations were audio-recorded, and all relevant statements and exchanges were later transcribed.

The ten individuals who participated in qualitative interviews ranged in age from 41-78, and included four men and six women. They had lived in cohousing for between 1 and 20 years, (average of 9.9 years), and came from the states of MA, CA, OR, and CO. Seven were married or in long-term partnerships, and three were single, and nine had children (ages ranged from 8-
Four interviewees had graduate degrees, and an additional three had BA degrees. Nine interviewees described themselves as Caucasian, and one did not disclose her racial/ethnic background.

**Qualitative Interviews.** The interviews were conversational, in that secondary prompts and follow-up questions were used liberally in order to more deeply explore topics of interest. The first questions were designed to be open and non-directive, in order to allow interviewees to spontaneously bring up the issue of social support, or not. Later questions in the interview focused more explicitly on issues of social support, and sought to elicit a thorough account of the ways that participants give and receive support in their communities.

Four main questions were asked of the interview participants after attaining basic demographic information:

a. Why did you choose to move into your cohousing community? What were the most important reasons for your consideration of/choice of this community?

b. How has living in cohousing impacted or changed your life?

c. How do you give and/or receive support from other people in your cohousing community?

d. How does your experience of feeling socially supported (or unsupported) in cohousing compare to your experience of other living situation?

**Data Analysis Procedures.** Data analysis for Part I consisted of thematic analysis of the recorded interviews with ten cohousing residents. Thematic analysis, using the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was chosen as a rigorous yet flexible method of uncovering patterned responses (themes) in the data. An inductive or “bottom up” approach was attempted, with the understanding that the specific topic of interest is social support. The interview data was first
sorted and categorized in order to reduce and organize thematic material which emerged repeatedly, and then explained/interpreted in light of the issues of interest and the demographic life circumstances of the participants. Both semantic (explicit) and latent (underlying, interpretive) approaches to uncovering themes were explored, with the resulting thematic analysis reflecting elements of each. This information was then used to inform quantitative questions which were then included in the survey for Part II.

**Part II: Survey**

**Participants and Recruitment Procedures.** Participants for Part II were recruited at the National Cohousing Association (USA) annual conference and via an email listserv which caters to cohousing residents and those who are interested in cohousing. At the conference, a table was set up with study information and hard copies of the survey, and several announcements were made by the researcher at conference sessions. The recruitment email invited individuals aged 18 or older to fill out an online survey (using SurveyMonkey), and emphasized that both cohousing residents and non-cohousing residents were welcome to complete the survey. No name or contact information was requested on any survey materials, and no compensation was offered.

Of the 127 total participants in the survey, 60 lived in a cohousing community and 65 did not. Two endorsed living in “intentional communities which are not specifically cohousing,” and were excluded from analyses which compared cohousing residents against non-cohousing residents. The sample contained 92 women (67%), and the mean age was 56.6, $SD = 11.7$. The majority of the participants were highly educated, reporting graduate degrees (61%) and BA-level degrees (29%) as their education level. More than half of the participants (63%) identified as Democratic, 15% identified as Independent, and 1.5% identified as Republican. The sample was primarily Caucasian (92%), with a minority identifying as Hispanic (2.3%) or Asian/Pacific
Islander (2.3%). The majority of the participants had children (68%). However, many of these children were grown (age 18+), and participants reported household sizes of one (25%), two (41%), three (7%), and four or more individuals (10%). No significant differences in age, sex, race, education level, income, or political affiliation were found between cohousing and non-cohousing participants. Among participants who currently live in cohousing communities, the number of years living in ranged from 1-20 year, \( M = 8.07 \) years, \( SD = 4.68 \).

Measures. While agreement around theoretical conceptualization of social support as a psychological construct has advanced significantly in recent research, decisions about how to measure social support have remained challenging for researchers. Tardy (1985) argued that lack of agreement around how best to measure social support severely impeded the production of high-quality research, and reviewed seven common measures. Some measures focused exclusively on perceived social support, asking questions which focus on the respondent’s belief that social support (of various types) would be available if he/she needed it. Others have taken a more behavioral approach, inquiring specifically about the number of times in the past month that a given socially supportive behavior has been given or received by the respondent. The current survey consisted of items drawn from several sources and representing different elements of social support.

Items taken from the General Social Survey. The General Social Survey is administered annually to a representative sample of United States residents. The four questions selected for inclusion in the current study were asked in 2002 and 2004, and were chosen because they represent behavioral indicators of social support; one example item is “In the past 12 months, how many times have you helped someone outside of your household with housework or
shopping?” Participants select the number of times they have performed the given behavior based on a likert scale with options ranging from “never” to “more than once per week.”

These questions were used to compare cohousing residents (from the current sample) against non-cohousing residents (from the current sample) as well as against a sample of General Social Survey participants. Sixty individuals were selected from the publicly available 2002 and 2004 GSS data because they matched individuals from the current cohousing sample on sex, age, education level, race, education status, and political orientation. Race, sex, and political orientation were matched exactly (to the degree that coding schemes allowed), and age and educational status were matched as closely as possible, with differences in one year of age or one degree-level occurring in four instances.

Because of minor discrepancies in coding schemas between the GSS variables (income, political orientation, and the four social support items), and the current data collection, recoding was necessary to support valid comparisons. Several response options on the social support questions were collapsed in order to facilitate comparisons across groups; specifically, for GSS questions 1, 2, and 4, options “more than once per week” and “almost daily” were collapsed, and options “several times per month” and “once per month” were collapsed to form a new response option entitled “1-3 times per month.”

The Social Provisions Scale.

The Social Provisions Scale (SPS; Cutrona & Russell, 1987) is a widely-used and well-validated measure of perceived social support. The 24-item scale measures the perceived social supports or “provisions” received from others in the respondent’s life, and contains six subscales: guidance, reliable alliance, reassurance of worth, social integration, attachment, and opportunity to provide nurturance. These subscales are based on the six social provisions identified by Weiss
(1974), and reflect different elements of social support which may vary independently of each other. The breadth of social support functions included within this scale makes it particularly well-suited to assess the overall social support experienced by individuals, and to analyze whether different types of support are more particularly relevant to the cohousing/intentional community context.

Within the 24-item scale, half of the items are reverse-scored, and a higher score indicates a higher level of social support. Each item consists of a statement about the respondent’s perception of available support, and respondents are asked to select whether they \textit{Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree}, or \textit{Strongly Disagree} with the statement. For example, one item states “There are people I can depend on to help me if I really need it.” Individual item selection for each of the subscales was based on factor analyses, and a subsequent confirmatory factor analysis resulted in a goodness-of-fit index of .86 (Russell & Cutrona, 1984). Reliability and validity assessments of the SPS have been conducted by the original authors as well as others. Internal consistency estimates of the scale (Coefficient alpha’s) have ranged from .76 to .89 (Russell & Cutrona, 1984). Predictive validity was assessed in Cutrona’s (1984) study of first-time mothers, and indicated that four of the six subscales (reliable alliance, reassurance of worth, social integration, and guidance) were predictive of postpartum depression. Scores on the SPS were also found to be predictive of loneliness, depression, and health status among a sample of 300 school teachers (Russell, Altwater, & Van Velzen, 1984). Convergent validity was assessed in Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona’s (1980) study of college freshmen, in which several subscales (social integration, reassurance of worth, and guidance) were found to be significantly related to scores on the UCLA Loneliness Scale.
For the current data analysis, the Social Provisions Scale total score and subscale scores were calculated according to instructions by the authors (Cutrona & Russell, 1987). Cutrona and Russell (1987) set forth criteria for scoring the Social Provisions Scale, such that a score one SD higher than the normative mean represents a moderately high level of social support, while a score two SD’s higher than the mean represents a high level of social support. The normative mean for the SPS is 82.45, and the SD is 9.89; therefore, SPS total scores of 92 and higher represent moderately high social support and scores of 102 or higher represent high social support. The same strategy is used to define low levels of social support. In this study, Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .922.

New Scales: Social Support Given and Social Support Received

A scale of 14 items was created using information drawn from several social support measures (Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors, Barrera, Sandler, & Ramsay, 1981; Social Support Questionnaire, Sarason, Sarason, Shearin, & Pierce, 1987), along with information gathered from qualitative interviews with cohousing members. These items were administered in two forms: first, all items were worded to reflect the socially-supportive behaviors that participants provided to others in their lives. For example, one item asks how frequently in the last six months the individual loaned someone else tools, appliances, or other objects. Next, the 14 items were administered with all wording changed to reflect socially-supportive behaviors the individual received. For example, one item asks how frequently the individual received emotional support through loss, illness/injury, or life changes. Coded responses to these questions were averaged, and scores were generated to represent the individual’s socially-supportive behaviors given, received, and total (including both). Cronbach’s
alpha coefficient for the two behavioral scales were .89 (for behaviors given to others) and .88 (for behaviors received).

**Other Items derived from responses to Part I**

Information gained through responses to qualitative questions during individual interviews was used to inform and design questions specific to the following topics:

1. Different motivations for seeking and joining cohousing communities (for current cohousing residents).
2. Life events, life stages, and demographic factors which informed/impacted the decision to join a cohousing community.
3. Ways in which cohousing members perceive differences in the amount and type of social support they give and receive living in cohousing as compare to prior living situations.
4. Barriers to joining cohousing (for current non-cohousing residents).

**Data Analysis Procedures**

1. Exploratory Factor Analysis was conducted on the two new scales, Social Support Given and Social Support Received.
2. It was hypothesized that members of cohousing communities would report higher levels of (a) perceived social support, (b) socially supportive behaviors received, and (c) socially supportive behaviors given than similar (those interested in cohousing but not yet living in cohousing) individuals. The scores of cohousing members on the (new) Social Support Given/Received (SSG, SSR) scales and the Social Provisions Scale (SPS) were compared to the scores of similar (those interested in cohousing but
not yet living in cohousing) individuals using Mann-Whitney U tests (for the SPS; nonparametric), and T-tests (SSG, SSR; parametric).

3. It was hypothesized that members of cohousing communities would report engaging in more socially supportive behaviors than the average North American. Using questions drawn from the General Social Survey, the responses of 60 cohousing residents were compared to:
   a. A sample of 60 GSS respondents (from 2002 and 2004) matched on age, sex, education level, race, education status, and political orientation), using a Wilcoxon signed-rank test, and
   b. The current sample of 65 non-cohousing residents, using a Mann-Whitney U test.

4. Demographic factors such as age, sex, status as parent/non-parent and income were examined for relationships to perceived, given, and received social support, using the appropriate parametric and nonparametric tests.

   A Bonferroni correction was used to adjust for multiple comparisons within the quantitative data analysis, and a p value of .01 was chosen.

**Results**

**Survey Data**

**Factor structure of the new scales: Social Support Given (SSG), Social Support Received (SSR).** To explore the factor structure of the two scales created (Social Support Given and Social Support Received; SSG and SSR), two exploratory factor analyses (EFA) were conducted. Examination of the preliminary correlation matrix and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test indicated that the data was suitable for factor analysis. The first EFA was conducted on the 14 items of the Social Support Given (SSG) scale, using the principal component analysis extraction
method. Eigenvalues and the scree plot indicated a three factor solution explaining 63.75% of the total variance, with interpretable dimensions after a varimax rotation. The first factor (27.99% of the total variance) represented pragmatic, physical types of assistance, such as “borrowing someone’s car” or “helping someone with repairs, construction, or moving things.” The second factor (18.12 % of the total variance) was related to care for children and the sharing of skills, and contained items such as “Taught skills to children in your community or neighborhood (cooking, repairs, music, etc). The third factor (17.62% of the total variance) contained items related to the provision (or receipt) of support through difficulty, such as “Received emotional support through loss, illness/injury, or life changes” and “Talked to you when you were feeling sad, depressed, or anxious.”

The second EFA was conducted on the 14 items of the Social Support Received (SSR) scale (parallel in wording and meaning to the SSG scale), using the principal component analysis extraction method. Eigenvalues and the scree plot indicated a three factor solution, which explained 63.45% of the total variance, with interpretable dimensions after a varimax rotation. The three factors which emerged were identical to the solution for the first (SSG) EFA, with the three components accounting for 29.33%, 17.21%, and 16.91% of the variance, respectively. Coefficient alphas for the two behavioral scales were .90 (for behaviors given to others) and .88 (for behaviors received.) Subscale scores were subsequently calculated for both the “given” and “received” scales, and coefficient alphas for the subscales ranged from .71 to .88.

Table 1 shows factor loadings for each of the 14 items. Although the items displayed are worded in the direction of social support given, the loadings are shown for both support given and received. Additionally, Mann-Whitney U tests comparing cohousing residents’ and non-cohousing residents’ responses to each item were conducted to further explore specific types of
social support which vary by cohousing resident status, and significant differences are noted in Table 1. Since there were no items on which non-cohousing residents scored higher than cohousing residents, the directionality of all significant differences can be assumed to reflect higher endorsement by cohousing residents. As shown in the table, significant differences emerge most frequently for the items related to practical assistance, children, and sharing skills, and emerge more frequently for behaviors given than received.

(Table 1, found in Appendix A, goes here – table is oriented horizontally)

**Comparisons between cohousing residents and non-residents on behavioral measures of social support.** These measures assess the number of times (within a specified time frame) a given socially supportive behavior was performed or received, and address the research questions addressing social support differences between cohousing members and similar non-cohousing members. Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare scores on the behavioral scales of cohousing residents and non-cohousing residents. There was a significant difference in the scores for socially supportive behaviors given by cohousing residents \( (M = 2.34, SD = .87) \) and non-cohousing residents \( (M = 1.58, SD = .75) \); \( t (122) = 5.28, p < .001 \), with cohousing residents reporting having given higher numbers of socially-supportive behaviors. Similarly, there was a significant difference in the scores for socially supportive behaviors received by cohousing residents \( (M = 1.78, SD = .83) \) and non-cohousing residents \( (M = 1.33, SD = 0.79) \); \( t (121) = 3.09, p = .003 \). Finally, a total behavioral social support score (combining behaviors given and received) also differed significantly between cohousing, \( (M = 4.14, SD = 1.6) \) and non-cohousing residents \( (M = 2.91, SD = 1.46) \); \( t (121) = 4.44, p < .001 \). Subscale scores were also compared for behaviors given and received, and significant differences were found between cohousing residents and non-cohousing residents on three of the six subscales:
Cohousing members scored significantly higher on practical behaviors received \((p < .001)\), practical behaviors given \((p < .001)\), and behaviors given related to children and skills \((p = .002)\).

These results suggest that cohousing residents *give* and *receive* more socially-supportive behaviors than similar individuals who do not live in cohousing, in accordance with the initial hypothesis. Incidentally, across the entire sample scores for SSR and SSG were highly correlated, with \(r = .79\) \((p < .01)\). Provision or receipt of socially-supportive behaviors did not vary significantly by age, sex, parental status, or income; however, these elements are explored and discussed further in the qualitative analysis of interview data.

**Comparisons between cohousing residents and a matched sample on General Social Survey questions.** The four items taken from the US General Social Survey (GSS) were used to compare the responses of cohousing residents against non-cohousing residents in the current sample, and to compare the responses of cohousing residents against the nationally-representative data gathered from the GSS. Mann-Whitney U-tests were conducted to compare provision of socially-supportive behaviors across cohousing residents and non-cohousing residents in the current sample. As seen in Table 2 (below), across three of the four items, cohousing residents performed the socially-supportive behaviors significantly more frequently than non-cohousing residents. This finding further addresses the research question concerning whether cohousing residents give and receive more social support than similar individuals who are interested in cohousing.

In order to compare cohousing residents’ responses to those gathered in the General Social Survey, a matched sample was selected from all available GSS cases (administered 2002 and 2004), based on age, sex, education level, race, and political affiliation. Because the cohousing sample represented highly educated, largely Caucasian, liberal/Democratic, and
largely upper-middle class individuals, the matched sample drawn from the GSS data comprised a similar demographic selection. No significant differences in age, sex, education level, race, political affiliation, or income were found between the cohousing sample and the matched GSS sample. In order to address the research question concerning differences in socially-supportive behaviors between cohousing members and average North American individuals who do not live in cohousing, Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests were used to facilitate group comparisons. As shown Table 2, a significant difference was found between cohousing residents and the matched GSS sample on the GSS question inquiring about how often participants have spent a social evening with someone who lives in their neighborhood. No significant differences were found for the other three items.

Table 2
Percent of individuals reporting performing each behavior *once per month or more.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Current Sample Non-Cohousing</th>
<th>Current Sample Cohousing</th>
<th>GSS Matched Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Helped someone outside of your household with housework or shopping</td>
<td>20.3% ** p &lt; .01</td>
<td>40.3% **</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Spent time talking with someone who was a bit down or depressed.</td>
<td>59.4% *** p = .02</td>
<td>70.6% ***</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Spent a social evening with someone who lives in your neighborhood.</td>
<td>31.2% ** p &lt; .001</td>
<td>93.1% ** p &lt; .01</td>
<td>49.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Helped somebody to find a job.</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Indicates that an item-level Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test utilizing the full range of responses (from “never” to “almost daily”) revealed a significant difference between adjacent samples (current sample cohousing versus current sample noncohousing, current sample cohousing versus GSS matched sample) on this item.
Although the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test did not result in a significant finding according to the reduced alpha level ($p < .01$), a distinct trend is noted.

**Comparisons using non-behavioral (perceived) measures of social support.** The following data is drawn from self-response items assessing the participant’s *perception* of social support available, and begins to address research questions concerning the differences between cohousing residents and non-residents on perceived social support as well as the relationship between perceived and behavioral social support.

**The Social Provisions Scale (SPS).** Because the scores were not normally distributed, nonparametric tests were used in all comparisons using the SPS data. The mean SPS score for the current sample of cohousing residents was 83.95 ($SD = 8.88$), which was compared to the published normative mean (82.45, $SD = 9.89$) using a Kolmogorov Smirnov test. The cohousing mean was found to be significantly higher than the normative mean ($p = .034$). A Man-Whitney U test was conducted to compare cohousing residents and non-cohousing residents. Although cohousing residents received higher total scores, the difference was not significant ($p = .101$). No significant differences were found between cohousing residents and non-cohousing residents across SPS subscales, although several comparisons approached significance: cohousing residents scored higher on the Social Integration subscale ($p = .093$) and the Worth subscale ($p = .053$). Among cohousing residents, SPS score did not vary significantly by age or sex. However, using a Mann-Whitney U test, it was found that the total score was higher for parents than for non-parents ($Z = -2.94, p = .003$). Additionally, SPS score was found to be correlated with the score on the behavioral scales for Social Support Given (SSG; $\rho = .27, p = .004$) and Social Support Received (SSR; $\rho = .37, p < .001$).

**Other indicators of social support.** Cohousing residents reported that on average, 50% of all the social support they give is directed towards members of their cohousing community.
Interestingly, they also reported that on average, 70% of all the social support they receive is from members of their cohousing community. In addition, the majority (69.5%) of cohousing participants indicated that they feel “much more supported” in cohousing as compared to previous living situations, with an additional 18.6% reporting feeling “moderately more supported.”

**Reasons for seeking or joining Cohousing.** Although the research questions concerning reasons for joining cohousing and demographic factors underlying these motivations are primarily addressed within the qualitative analysis of interview data (below), some quantitative data addressing this issue was collected. Cohousing residents were asked to rate the importance of various factors (selected from common interview responses) as being important to their decision to seek or join cohousing. These results are displayed in Figure 1, below.

**Figure 1**
Percent cohousing members endorsing factors as **somewhat important, very important, or extremely important** in the decision to seek or join cohousing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>% Somewhat</th>
<th>% Very</th>
<th>% Extremely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction with traditional nuclear family living models.</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had prior positive experience of community living during adulthood</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had positive experience of community living during childhood</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted children to grow up in community</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to live in a more ecologically sustainable manner</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desires for practically supportive relationships with neighbors</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire for emotionally supportive relationships with neighbors</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cohousing residents were also given several open prompts, stating “Please list the three most important reasons for your decision to seek or join a cohousing community” and “Is there
anything else you would like to share about your experience of cohousing?” Although many responses duplicated the factors found in Figure 1, several other responses emerged repeatedly. First, a number of participants spoke to concerns related to ageing, including the desire to live in a community and home which would be supportive as they age, physically and mentally. Second, a number of participants spoke to their desire for a “family,” and found non-traditional forms of family in their cohousing community. One participant wrote about her experience of the “empty nest,” and another stated, “Now we are just starting on the grandchildren route and look forward to enjoying others’ grandchildren as much as our own.” Speaking clearly to a sense of broader community and connection, one of the few racial minority women in the sample wrote “For a Latina, used to a strong sense of community in her native country/town, cohousing is a good way to feel at home and accepted by a diversity of Americans.”

Interview Data

Interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis, and was used to address the research questions concerning motivations for seeking/joining cohousing, demographic factors (age, sex, status as parent/nonparent, et) impacting this decision, and overall experience of social support in community. Emergent themes are organized within the four primary interview questions.

**Why Cohousing?** When asked why they desired, chose (or, in some cases, pioneered) a cohousing community, participants pointed frequently to the following five reasons or values: prior experience of community living, dissatisfaction with nuclear family living models, desire for ecologically sustainable living, desire for friendly supportive relationships with neighbors, and values related to child-rearing and/or multigenerational living. Each is described briefly, and is accompanied by direct quotations from individuals who highlighted each value.
Prior experience of community. In many cases, participants spontaneously reviewed their life experiences with community living (often starting with their families of origin), and described how fond memories of previous community experiences influenced them to seek this later in life. One woman spoke about growing up on military bases, recalling the constant flow of other children in and out of her house. A man recalled attending boarding school as a teenager. Another woman (age 48) spoke of her experience growing up in shared faculty housing:

- It was really like cohousing, minus the common house. The mothers at home shared childcare, we ran around in open spaces, we got very close to our neighbors. This left a big impression. By the time I was an adult, I had this sense that that was the way to raise a family, be a mom, be a kid.

Dissatisfaction with nuclear family living models. Repeatedly, in both explicit and implicit ways, participants expressed acute dissatisfaction with what they perceived as the normative, nuclear family living model. They described experiences of isolation, disconnection, and loneliness while living alone or with a nuclear family, and expressed varying degrees of discomfort, even disgust, with this situation. One woman in particular (age 74), expressed her vision of mainstream American living vividly and with dismay,

- No matter how little money we have or property we can afford, we insist on a private house that’s a bit away from other houses, - and all of the modern conveniences have made it possible for you to live totally inside your house. If you’re really rich, you don’t even have to go to the movies!

Sustainable, ecological living, sharing resources. A number of participants spoke to a desire to live in a more ecologically sustainable manner as important to their decision to seek cohousing. One woman (age 41) described reducing her carbon footprint
as a fulfilling an important spiritual component of her life, while a man (age 54) reflected
on his early study of utopian communities, and his lifelong study of ecologically
sustainable models for human living.

**Desire for friendly, supportive relationships with neighbors.** Almost unanimously,
participants spoke of their desires for friendly, social, warm connections with their neighbors.
One man (age 54) described

Having fantasies about [my] friends who are spread throughout the world;
wouldn’t it be nice if we lived on a cul-de-sac? That fantasy was about connection
and friends, and so when I learned about cohousing, it seemed like a
manifestation of that fantasy, about sense of community and neighborhood and
friendship.”

Another man (age 68) focused more on pragmatic, practical support, and the importance
of having shared goals. He stated,

I like having other like-minded people around to socialize with, enjoy working
together with people on projects, having a sense that we are supporting each
other. Mutual support! I like the idea of being in a community where the group is
managing the community, doing work jointly, sharing work.

Finally, one woman (age 56) spoke clearly to the ease involved in maintaining social
intimacy and connection while living in cohousing. She said,

The initial impulse was around social connection and support. I run on the more
spontaneous side of the spectrum, - planning is not my forte – so to have a rich
social life, I can’t depend on myself to plan it in advance. Once you’re out of
university or partnered or working full-time, you start setting appointments with
people to actually meet and have conversations. At school, I could just stop into the coffeehouse at a particular time, and see 3 or 4 of the people I wanted to talk with.

**Children, multigenerational living.** Repeatedly, participants spoke to their desire to raise children in community, or live in a multigenerational community. One man (age 54) stated, “cohousing is people who want to explicitly be friendly with their neighbors and give and get support from each other. I was interested in it before I had kids, but it was even more appealing bringing my kids up in a neighborhood where they would know one another.” When prompted to share more about why this was important to him, he stated a desire for his children to have “a high ratio of adults to children, repeated positive interactions with grownups who you trust and you’ll forge relationships.” An older man (age 71) framed his interest in cohousing around his search for a permanent living situation where he and his wife could age in place. He said, I moved my mother to live in a senior development, and my first reaction was, “Oh, there’s all these old people around here!” My wife and I didn’t want to live in a senior community – we wanted intergenerational. I’ve been very active here since retirement . . . I’m on the board, chair the finance committee, plan the retreats, now on the community life committee – these things are practical and pleasurable, and engage me.”

Finally, several participants described an acute awareness of their own vulnerabilities, needs, and abilities as they age, and emphasized this as an important element of their decision-making process. One man (age 71) wrote, I’m pretty healthy, and so is my wife, and so we haven’t needed much support – on the other hand, other people here have had difficulties or crises in their lives –
and we’ve been able to help them. From my perspective, it’s nice and rewarding to be able to help someone who genuinely needed help. I’m aware that I’m getting older, and physically can’t do what I used to, and may suffer health problems in the future, and I will know that I will receive help from the community – knowing that is comforting, looking towards the future of getting older.

**Social Support in Cohousing Communities.** Responses to my inquiry around ways that social support is shared in community varied widely. After thematic extraction, several core types of social support emerged: formalized support, informal support, pragmatic support, and difficulty-driven support. Each is discussed below, with examples drawn directly from the data. At the end of this section, responses which pointed to a lack of social support are also presented and discussed.

**Formalized systems of support.** Nearly every participant spoke briefly to the social structures in place which facilitate supportive interactions, including community meals, workdays, and holiday celebrations. However, some communities have taken this one-step further, forming committees whose responsibility it was to be attuned to the needs of the community (or specific individuals), and coordinate the provision of support in a more organized manner. One woman (age 48) described a team which “springs into action” when there is a particular need in her community. For example, when a baby is born, this committee creates a signup for meals to be provided to the family for several weeks.

**Informal systems of support.** By far the majority of socially-supportive behaviors described during the interviews were informal, sometime routine, often unplanned interactions. One woman (age 56) described enthusiastically her perception that support is available “on
demand, all the way from ‘I need an egg’ to ‘I just had the biggest fight with my husband.’”

Repeatedly, participants described these brief, casual interactions which, although very supportive, were unremarkable in the context of their cohousing community.

*Childrearing.* Many of the interviewees chose to speak about their children when I inquired about social support. From impromptu childcare to subtle guidance and mentorship of community children, these interactions and exchanges emerged as frequent and immensely important to parents who live in cohousing. One man (age 54) said, “I do a lot of informal trading of childcare – one of them needs to go to something, asks me to watch their kids for an hour – and I ask for that, too. The ease of doing that in cohousing, 40 feet away from my house, rather than calling, orchestrating, driving my kids – that’s not small!” Another woman (age 41) said, “My consent form for my school says ‘anyone from my cohousing neighborhood can pick up my child from school,’” and described the ways in which her childcare schedule involves several community members. Others described using baby monitors to listen for nearby children while their parents attended meetings or socialized among the community, or enlisting older children to supervise the community playground while adults stayed in their homes. Over and over again, participants expressed gratitude for the atmosphere in which their children could “roam freely” throughout the community, trusting that other adults will provide supervision or care if needed.

*Practical assistance.* Many participants reported the exchange of practical, pragmatic support within their community, involving sharing objects (recreational equipment, tools, appliances), borrowing cars or offering rides, and caring for each others’ homes, plants, and pets while they were away. Community members described a natural, self-selecting flow of support requested and given based on individuals’ needs and abilities. One woman (age 78) said,
I get up early, so if somebody wants a ride to the airport at 6 am that’s great, and if I need a ride I can ask someone. It’s nice to know that if I go away for a few days, my neighbor will take care of my cat. If I’m about to cook something and need an egg, and I send out an email, and within 15 minutes I’ve got 5 offers of eggs.

Another resident (age 71) said,

At my age, digging is difficult, I don’t have a strong back – I get some help from my neighbors. I bought an ornamental crab apple that was beautiful, but it was big – and I was struggling to dig this hole to plant it – and my neighbor came and helped me. I’ve since hired his son, paying him a relatively low wage, to help in digging some flower beds, planting things, mow the lawn.

**Support through difficulty or life changes.** A theme which emerged repeatedly and clearly was that of support, sometimes to extraordinary degrees, provided between cohousing residents during times of crisis, illness, or difficult life events. One man (age 71) described an incident in which his community had rallied to provide care for a mother and daughter:

This morning, I drove a woman here to her office, so she could go to work. About 2 weeks ago, she had some type of heart episode, and was in the ER. She’s a single mother with an adopted child who is 10 years old. She was hospitalized. The community really supported her daughter – took her in, helped feed her. When the mom came back from the hospital, they told her she couldn’t drive for a month. So, she has to continue working to support herself and her daughter. For two weeks the community provided lunches and dinner, and have been driving her everywhere, taking her daughter to piano lessons, etc.
Another participant described her community’s devastation when a woman in her 50’s was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease and began losing her memory. She discussed the ways in which the community had gathered to meet her needs, and the difficult decisions involved in establishing and securing appropriate care for this individual.

**Lack of support.** Several participants spoke, spontaneously or with prompting, to some of the difficulties, downsides, and problematic elements of their social experiences in cohousing. Some of these elements related to hopes and expectations around cohousing which went unmet, others represent known and anticipated challenges of living in community, and still others involved painful and surprising disappointments. Several participants described experiences of social exclusivity or privilege, feeling as though support was offered preferentially to some community members and not others. One woman (age 74) stated, “There’s one table at dinner where the same seven people always eat together. It feels cliquish to me!” Another (age 61) stated,

> The founders create situations that exclude community members if/when they express differing values/opinions. . . . 'Buyer beware' is what I am often inclined to tell people who want to move here. The honeymoon period is very intense and welcoming and then the reality of how things are done is slowly revealed. I regret not exploring the community more before buying the home I am in.

Another woman (age 61, single) stated,

> I feel more isolated than I could have imagined. The community has 'cliques,' and because of my age I fall in between the families and the elders. I offer support whenever I can, however, I rarely get asked because the community is broken into
its small homogenous group: the stay at home moms, the elders etc. I get most of my support from friends outside of the community.

One man (age 54) spoke to his struggle to accept the limitations of his community’s connectedness. He said,

I have a handful of people who do provide emotional support, close friendships - we have created permission to be personal and emotionally vulnerable together. . .

The others don’t seem to be open to that way of being. Fine, ok, really. I’ve learned that not everybody is going to be into it.

**Life impact: How has living in cohousing impacted you and/or your family?** In response to this question, several participants seemed to pause, struggling with how to articulate or quantify the impact of such a pervasive and determining condition on their life. One woman (age 48) focused on her adult relationships:

I have very close friendships with women. I can go out the door at any point and go have a shoulder to cry on or laugh with or any number of things. I raised my kids with another woman here, who has daughters the same age – we just had a tragedy in that her eldest daughter lost her first baby. I was over at her house every day, for several hours a day, just to be there.

Another woman (age 56) focused on the experience of her children, describing their exposure to and connection with other adults in the community:

Kids get access to lots of different adults. I mean, they find it annoying – that somebody’s always watching you – but the things that different parents are involved in and willing to share with other kids is a natural outcome. Like, my son is very interested in engineering and building things, and my husband and I
are clueless. My son has a couple of people in the community who do that, and they’re happy to teach him, answer questions, include him in building projects. So he’s grown up with that available to him.

A unique and provocative perspective on the experience of cohousing was offered by one woman (age 56). She stated,

If you interviewed my husband, you would not believe that we were married. He doesn’t get the same kind of benefits out of cohousing that I do, at all. . . . In making the decision to move into cohousing, it’s the men who are dragging their feet. All I can say is that the task of being the main childrearing person as well as working – I couldn’t have done it without the support of my neighbors. With a few exception of one or two, whomever was doing the heavy lifting on the childrearing, keeping all the balls in the air, usually the women, band together to make it happen.

Challenges, downsides, and difficulties. In response to my question about life impact, some participants described difficulties inherent in “getting along” with a large group of people, especially around issues of shared ownership, social structures, and parenting practices. Speaking directly to the dynamic of making decisions and getting along with her community, one woman said, (age 41) “It’s like having an extended family – and there are some people in your family that you don’t like or flat out revile.” One man (age 54) said,

[Cohousing] has made me appreciate the concept of diversity on a different level. Merely getting along and working things out with people have different perspectives – like, “Why on earth would you think that?” – or, “why are you
acting that way?” – it’s sometimes a very profound way of having to deal with people who are different from me, and that’s at times challenging.

He went on to say,

“We have a lot of kids in our community, and the issues about parenting are more challenging than anything to me. I think other people underparent, and they probably think I overparent. I’m stunned by the lack of structure they provide their kids, or the behaviors they think are acceptable. I feel like I don’t understand where they come from sometimes, and, I think that I’m more patient and more flexible by having to live in community and get along and make decisions by consensus together.”

Despite the challenges, frustrations, and disappointments described, a number of participants conveyed a clear focus on growth and development and a sense of gratitude for the challenges incurred in cohousing. One woman (age 41) said that,

[Cohousing] challenged me to be involved and stay in relationships, especially with the kinds of people that I would completely cut out of my life. It’s definitely made me a better person – learning tolerance and learning to work with people. You kinda know you’re in it for the long term, I mean, you’re all property owners, you’re invested in it.

**Comparison to previous living situations.** The majority of participants said that they felt more supported in their cohousing community than in past living situations, and this general sense is corroborated by the quantitative data reported above. Describing the contrast between cohousing and her previous home, one woman (age 56) stated,
There’s no comparison. We lived for 3 years in a [City] suburb, with small kids, going to school, work – that was my idea of hell. It was bad – hard to find the people who were my people, to find my tribe. And even when I did find my tribe, it was very hard to actually get together with them. Did our kids get along? Did our husbands get along?

This theme of gratitude and broad satisfaction was echoed by the majority of the participants, with varying degrees of emphasis. However, one in particular expressed dissatisfaction with his current level of social support, saying,

In some ways, I have been disappointed with cohousing – because I compare it with this other intentional community that I lived in for [many] years. In that community, we met twice a month, one business meeting, one sharing meeting – we’d just go around the room, “what’s happening in your life” – for three or four hours. Over [many] years, you really get to know people really well. Cohousing is not that intimate, and there are some people that are more involved than others . . .

I wish it were more intimately close, in some ways.

Final Comments

In reviewing the rich responses from these interviews, two additional themes merit brief attention. First, the majority of participants report phenomenal satisfaction with cohousing, speaking in glowing terms about their experiences of connectedness and support, with only two expressing significant dissatisfaction. However, those two both spoke to themes of social inequality and exclusion. This makes particularly relevant the relatively homogeneous nature of many cohousing communities; there is frequently little diversity in terms of race, socioeconomic class, education level, and political values. These ten interviews suggested the following
preliminary understanding of this issue; for those individuals who find acceptance, inclusion, reflected values and priorities, and sameness in cohousing, the social climate can be one of profound connection, validation, and intimacy. However, for those who feel (or are cast as) the outsider in almost any way (age, parenting style, cultural values, communication style, etc), the experience of cohousing can be one of profound isolation, recapitulating painful and sometimes lifelong themes of social hierarchy and exclusion.

Second, these interview conversations made abundantly clear that cohousing (and giving/receiving social support) is not a passive process. Cohousing members do not simply design their facilities, move in, and wait for the magic of social support to occur. Rather, it is a deliberate, ongoing effort which requires intentionality, oversight, commitment, and care to create a culture and community of connection. For members who understand and are prepared for this commitment, it can be very rewarding. For those who resent the considerable demands which this living format makes on their time, energy, and interpersonal skill, it can be a burden. These themes, among others, are explored further in the following discussion section.

**Discussion**

This study sought to elucidate, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the phenomenon of social support in the cohousing model of community. Several research questions probed the relationship between perceived, given, and received social support across cohousing membership status and several demographic factors. Additionally, interviews were utilized to probe deeply into the motivations for, strengths of, and challenges associated with joining and living in cohousing. Below, study results (and limitations) are discussed, integrated, and connected with the broader phenomena of social capital, social sustainability, and the ecological model.
Interpretative Considerations

A primary research hypothesis concerned the amount of social support available to, given, and received by cohousing members, as compared to demographically similar individuals who are interested in (but not living in) cohousing. Survey results addressed this question from multiple angles. First, significant differences in participant responses on the new Social Support Given (SSG) and Social Support Received (SSR) scales suggest that cohousing residents both give and receive significantly more socially supportive behaviors (by a wide margin) than demographically similar non-cohousing residents. However, responses to the Social Provisions Scale did not reveal significant differences in perceived social support between cohousing residents and non-cohousing residents. Further, scores on the SSG and SSR were only weakly correlated with scores SPS. These discrepancies may best be understood via a close examination of the method of measurement used by each instrument.

The SSG/SSR scales assess social support by inquiring about the provision and receipt of socially supportive behaviors, asking participants to specify how many times a given supportive interaction has actually occurred within a given past timeframe. The Social Provision Scale (SPS), however, uses hypothetical questions, assessing the participant’s subjective sense of the availability of social support were it needed or desired. The data suggests that cohousing residents, while endorsing a subjective assessment of available support similar to non-cohousing residents, are actually performing and receiving more socially-supportive behaviors than their non-cohousing peers. Interpretation of this discrepancy may be informed by cohousing members’ responses and narratives gathered during the in-depth, qualitative interviews.

As seen clearly in the results section reporting qualitative findings from the interview data, cohousing members spontaneously and emphatically list social support, in many forms
(pragmatic, formalized, informal, difficulty-driven, etc), as some of the most important reasons to seek cohousing and benefits to living in cohousing. Participants repeatedly shared examples of socially-supportive connections in a forthcoming manner, conveying pride in and commitment to this element of their cohousing experience. In fact, many participants described interactions which, to a non-cohousing resident would seem extraordinary in their supportiveness (taking in a child for weeks while the their parent had medical treatment, stepping in to provide meals when someone had suffered a loss), as though they were absolutely routine, ordinary, and hardly worth mention. However, these glowing stories were balanced by some similarly emphatic and impassioned explanations of just how hard it can be to live in committed, intimate community. Members spoke to the painstaking process of making decision by consensus, describing long meetings and frustrating differences in vision for the community, individual desires, and interpersonal styles. Others described hurtful miscommunications, conflict-ridden social dynamics, and profoundly challenging decisions about community rules and guidelines.

In light of these contrasting (but clearly coexisting) benefits and challenges to living in cohousing, it appears that cohousing residents give and receive far more socially-supportive behaviors than their non-cohousing peers, but that they (a) think of it as nothing extraordinary, and (b) are faced with the sometimes taxing work and struggle involved in sustaining and continually creating a socially-supportive and sustainable community – and thus, do not report that they are exceptionally satisfied with or abundant in support on subjective measures of perceived social support.

The General Social Survey (GSS) questions produced results which only partially supported the initial hypothesis that cohousing residents would score higher than both current sample non-cohousing residents and a matched sample drawn from the GSS. Cohousing
residents scored significantly higher on three out of the four questions when compared to their demographically similar non-cohousing peers (current sample), but on only one of the questions when compared to a matched sample drawn from the 2002 and 2004 GSS. Two possible explanations for this finding are as follows: First, as Putnam (1993; 2000) theorized and then found in his empirical research, the behaviors which build social capital (many of which are also behaviors of social support) have been in decline over the past 50 years. It is plausible that the incidence of these interactions has continued to decline over the most recent 10 years (between the 2002/2004 administration of the GSS) and the current data collection. If this were the case, it is possible that this time lapse (history) may account for some of the variance in responses to the GSS questions. A second explanation for this finding concerns the selection of the comparison group of individuals who are demographically similar and interested in cohousing, but do not yet live in cohousing. This comparison group was chosen to counter the pervasive self-selection bias (in cohousing membership), and the possibility that cohousing residents have high levels of social support simply because they are interested in and value social connections or extraversion, rather than as a function of their cohousing membership. While the current methodology did accomplish this, it also (inevitably) introduced another potential source of bias; it is possible that those individuals expressing interest in cohousing were doing so precisely because they experienced a lack of socially supportive connections in their lives. If this were the case, their lower provision of socially-supportive behaviors may be reflective of any number of individual characteristics (loneliness, social skills deficits, etc) rather than as a function of their living arrangement.

During the interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions about what in their life (events) or their desires (values, motivations) contributed to their seeking or joining
cohousing. Participants overwhelmingly responded with a desire for “community,” which they were then prompted to “unpack” or describe in more specific terms. Several different meanings for “community” emerged, and included practically (instrumental, pragmatic) supportive relationships, emotionally supportive and friendly relationships, and a desire for multigenerational living. However, along with this desire for community, many interviewees clearly expressed a potent dissatisfaction with the normative nuclear family living model, citing isolation, disconnection, exhaustion, and a consumption-based lifestyle. They spontaneously recalled experiences in their lives when they had experienced elements of their desired community environment, (along with experiences of devastating lack of community) sometimes recapitulating with uncanny accuracy Putnam’s (2000) thesis of declining social capital in American culture.

When asked to discuss their experiences of social support (or lack therof) in cohousing, participants shared incidents both routine and extraordinary, and a very coherent picture of the kinds of support (pragmatic, emotional, difficulty-driven) which are frequently exchanged in cohousing communities. Although it was not specifically probed or questioned during interviews, the issue of lifespan development or life-stage repeatedly emerged as a salient (explicit or implicit) issue, and as such merits additional consideration. Those participants who lived in a cohousing community in which they fit nicely into a life-stage-based cohort (for example, retirees or parents of young children) reported tremendous satisfaction with the levels of social support they received, while those who felt “in-between groups” or that they were in some way an outsider reported much less support and satisfaction. Interestingly, several of the female interviewees reported that they found much more value in their cohousing experience
than their male partners did, although this trend was not supported in the quantitative (survey) data.

One particularly articulate participant suggested that within partner relationships, the person who is “doing the heavy lifting” of primary child-rearing responsibilities (typically the woman) tends to find the most value in living in cohousing, whereas those who work mostly outside of the home (typically the men) are less enthusiastic and less impacted by the cohousing culture. While the scope and methodology of this study is not designed to rigorously evaluate this claim, this participant’s perspective did inspire a review of the interview data through the lenses of gender and lifespan development, and several possible themes emerged. First, it was largely the primary caretakers of children (who were not necessarily women) who spoke most frequently and emphatically about small and frequent exchanges of instrumental (practical) support between cohousing residents. Simple things like borrowing an egg, watching each others’ children so that phone calls could be made, and sharing transportation were cited repeatedly as profoundly helpful to the parent who is juggling housekeeping, childcare, and often employment. These individuals were frequently effusive in their communication about the impact these exchanges and relationships have had on their lives. Secondly, the male interviewees who were retired spoke spontaneously and emphatically about their enjoyment of feeling useful, involved, and central to the well-being of the community. They sat on various committees, took on special (and often large-scale) projects, and reported a great sense of satisfaction at being of instrumental and often of tangible assistance to others in the community.

Given the socio-cultural importance and value placed on men’s productivity and generativity (Kruse & Schmitt, 2012), this emphasis of men finding valuable work within the community after their external careers end may be reflective of a broader cultural phenomenon. In addition,
cohousing (or similar community engagement) may facilitate continued vital involvement and positive self-worth after retirement. Again, although these considerations exceed the scope of the current project, a closer examination of the relationship between gender and lifespan development may be important to understanding social motivations and relationships in community.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The questions posed by this mixed-method study are ambitious, in that they attempt to accomplish both broad, exploratory, qualitative investigation and rigorous, focused, quantitative analysis of a phenomenon on which there exists very little prior research. As such, this study should be viewed as a first step towards elucidating the issues at hand, and as a platform for future investigation. Each of the interpretive considerations and study limitations discussed below are integrated with suggestions for future research.

First, the participants in both interviews and survey represent a relatively homogeneous group; predominantly Caucasian, upper-middle class, educated, and middle-aged residents of the USA. While this sample is largely representative of the current cohousing population, it remains a very narrow segment of the broader world community. It is essential to note that the lack of racial, cultural, and socio-economic diversity is an issue of concern for cohousing members and developers alike (Paiss, 1994), and several initiatives are underway to recruit and support residents who represent diverse demographic groups, including the incorporation of subsidized, low-income housing units within new cohousing developments. Additionally, cohousing (and intentional community more broadly) exist and are flourishing in many different parts of the world (including Europe, Central and South America, and Asia), and that the members and demographic norms of these different communities are by nature quite varied. Future research
might incorporate an international sample, and look closely into the relationships between cohousing culture, race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and even socio-ecological environment. Similarly, related research might examine non-cohousing forms of intentional community (eco-villages, non-residential communities) which have emerged as parallel community structures, each working to envision and create social sustainability in different ways.

Second, in several instances, the use of different coding schemes across samples and data sources made direct comparison difficult, and resulted in the loss of detail on several variables. For future study, the use of a consistent data collection and coding scheme would support specificity and power in quantitative analysis.

Third, some limitations are inherent to the recruitment methods. Both the interview and survey data collected for this study was gathered based on volunteer participants, and thus cannot be assumed to be adequately representative of the cohousing population. For example, the current samples were composed of more women than men, and of several individuals significantly older than the average cohousing member. It is plausible that these group differences (and others) impacted the results of both the interviews and the survey, and a randomly-selected study sample would offer a more accurate picture.

Fourth, as discussed above, the use of comparison groups for this study was effective but imperfect, and the replication of this study design with alternative comparison groups (American citizens who live in condominium housing, urban and/or rural settings, small towns, etc) would allow for illumination where this study failed to provide clear distinctions.

Lastly, the current study rests on the very strong body of research indicating that social support is a powerful predictor of physical and psychological health. It is strongly suggested that
future research conduct longitudinal analyses on cohousing members measuring not only social support, but also these ultimately important indicators of health: incidence of health problems, health care costs, hospital admissions, lifespan, etc. High-quality data about these outcomes would and access the variables which are most of interest for macro-level policy, planning, and public health initiatives, and further elucidate the relationships between perceived social support, behavioral social support, and health outcomes. If the cohousing model conveys the benefits that this study and others suggest, it is imperative the scholars continue to carry forward the research agenda of moving from anecdotes and hunches to data.

Finally, because the data gathered was strictly cross-sectional, great caution is required in attributing group differences in social support to cohousing membership; broad conclusions and causal relationships are not supported by this study design. A longitudinal study design (measuring behavioral and perceived social support before and after seeking/joining cohousing) with a randomly-selected sample would allow stronger conclusions to be drawn about the nature of the cohousing experience.

The Big Picture

This project began with an exploration of the literature on social sustainability (spanning anthropology, sociology, and ecology), social capital (centered in sociology, political science, and community psychology), and social support (psychology). While the design of the current study required that its focus was narrowed, operationalized, and centered around the measurable construct of social support, the underlying values and mission of the project remain grounded in the larger questions of social health and sustainability. It is fitting, then, that we close with a reconnection to these larger foundational values.
Micro-level, individual-to-individual provision of socially supportive behaviors forms the building blocks of social capital, which Putnam (2001) defined as the establishment of social norms that promote reciprocity and communal support. In the situation of cohousing, these small, informal, and seemingly fleeting interactions are facilitated in a subtle but very purposeful manner, through care and intentionality in the design of both physical and social infrastructure. What seems to be the case, then, is that these norms of interaction and support translate to a broader attitude of caring, investment, and responsibility which are then applied to a dizzying array of civic engagements, including local politics (Poley, 2005) and environmental practices, which are both important indicators of social sustainability. Meltzer (2005) with a focus on the environmental element of sustainability explains that in cohousing,

Circumstance facilitates human interaction which builds meaningful social relationships; supportive relationships in a community context imbue a sense of belonging to that community; belonging (to geographical community and therefore, ‘place’) induces confident engagement; and engagement with circumstance is the very basis of effective environmental praxis. (p. 156)

Meltzer is equally unabashed about the potential for cohousing to exert a transformative influence on our society at large:

A normative mainstream focus on individual and familial well-being, when combined with a material conception of the world, has produced the “great” Australian or American “dream.” In cohousing, through deepening one’s connection with others, such aspirations are dismantled and reassembled into a more altruistic, outwardly focused caring for the well-being of others.” (2005, p. 148)
The magnitude of this vision is undeniable, but so is the reality in which our social systems are experiencing dysfunction and dis-ease at every level of the ecological model. When Meltzer suggested that cohousing might lead the way in “defusing the consumerist imperative” in America, he articulated a possibility that is both audacious and desperately needed by a society aware of its ills but painfully adrift and paralyzed in its efforts to create a more livable, sustainable alternative.

Butcher (1996) suggested that intentional community provides “a human scale, knowable society in which individuals have reflected to them, and recognize, the importance of their personal roles.” In their respective arenas Meltzer (environmentalism), Butcher (community process) and Poley (civic engagement) have each implied that cohousing can function as a training ground and model for practicing the skills of living in socially sustainable community. This perspective best explains both the findings of this study and the dedicated commitment with which cohousing residents share, explain, and advocate for their community lifestyle. (Members repeatedly conveyed that they felt fundamentally good about cohousing, and that the challenges and difficulties, were, in some way, helping them to become better people. As one participant put it, “Cohousing is the most expensive personal development course ever!”)

Cohousing provides not condominiums for the wealthy, nor a utopian commune, nor immunity to loneliness, but a thoughtfully-designed physical and social infrastructure within which we can work hard towards our goals of supportive relationships, healthy community, and sustainable civilization. It is the hope of this author that this preliminary study paves the way for both further research, improving our understanding of the nature of cohousing and similar communities, and advocacy, policy, and practice which supports social sustainability in its many forms.
References


Appendix A

Table 1
Factor Loadings: Social Support Given and Social Support Received Scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Social Support Given (SSG)</th>
<th>Item-level tests</th>
<th>Social Support Received (SSR)</th>
<th>Item-level tests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Offered someone support through loss, illness/injury, or life changes</td>
<td>Factor 1</td>
<td>Factor 2</td>
<td>Factor 3</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Offered someone practical support through loss, illness/injury, or life changes</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Talked with someone who was feeling sad, depressed, or anxious</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td></td>
<td>.83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Watched or cared for someone’s child</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Taught skills to children in your community or neighbourhood (cooking, repairs, music, etc)</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Taught someone skills (cooking, repairs, music, etc)</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>Social Support Given (SSG)</td>
<td>Social Support Received (SSR)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>----------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Factor 1</td>
<td>Factor 2</td>
<td>Factor 3</td>
<td>Item-level tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Let someone borrow your car</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Gave someone a ride somewhere</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Offered to share shopping trips to Costco, etc</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Helped with repairs, construction, or moving things</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Helped with gardening or landscaping</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Loaned someone tools, appliances, or other objects</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Loaned someone recreational equipment (skis, bikes)</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Cared for someone’s pets/plants/house while they were away</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factor loadings less than .325 are omitted. ** Indicates that an item-level Mann-Whitney U test revealed a significant difference between cohousing residents and non-cohousing residents in responses to this item at the \( p < 0.01 \) level. For all items, cohousing residents reported giving (or receiving) the behavior more frequently than non-cohousing residents.
Appendix B: Survey

WELCOME to our survey! THANK YOU for your time, and your willingness to contribute to our understanding of cohousing. Below is some information about this study.

Northeastern University
Department of Counseling and Applied Educational Psychology
Name of Investigator(s): William Sanchez, PhD., Elizabeth Markle, Doctoral Candidate
Title of Project: Social Support as related to Cohousing Membership

We would like to invite you to participate in a web-based online survey. The survey is part of a research study whose purpose is to gather information about social support in cohousing residents and non-cohousing residents. This survey should take about 8-12 minutes to complete.

We are asking you to participate in this study because you are either a cohousing resident or interested in cohousing.

You must be at least 18 years old to take this survey. The decision to participate in this research project is voluntary. The possible risks or discomforts of the study are minimal. You may feel a little uncomfortable answering some survey questions.

You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the web-based online survey, you can stop at any time.

There are no direct benefits to you from participating in this study. However, your responses may help us learn more about how the role which social support plays in cohousing community membership.

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

Your part in this study is anonymous to the researcher(s). However, because of the nature of web-based surveys, it is possible that respondents could be identified by the IP address or other electronic record associated with the response. Neither the researcher nor anyone involved with this survey will be capturing those data. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you or any individual as being affiliated with this project.

If you have any questions regarding electronic privacy, please feel free to contact Mark Nardone, IT Security Analyst via phone at 617-373-7901, or via email at privacy@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Elizabeth Markle at markle.e@husky.neu.edu or 510-846-1607. You can also contact Dr. William Sanchez, w.sanchez@neu.edu, 617-373-2404 the Principal Investigator.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.7570, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

By continuing on to the survey, you are indicating that you consent to participate in this study. Please print out a copy of this consent form for your records.

Thank you for your time!

Elizabeth Markle
1. What is your sex?
   a+ Female
   a+ Male
   a+ It’s not that simple

2. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
   a+ Less than high school degree
   a+ High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)
   a+ Some college but no degree
   a+ Associate degree
   a+ Bachelor degree
   a+ Graduate degree

3. Which of the following categories best describes your employment status? (you can select more than one)
   j Employed, working 1-20 hours per week
   j Employed, working 21-39 hours per week
   j Employed, working 40 or more hours per week
   j Primary work is home-making or caring for family members
   j Full-time student, including employment as part of a graduate program
   j Not employed, looking for work
   j Not employed, NOT looking for work
   j Not employed, but have a regular volunteer position
   j Retired
   j Retired, but have a regular volunteer position
   j Disabled, not able to work
   j Disabled, but have a regular volunteer position
   Other (please specify)
4. Which of the following best describes your relationship status?
   - Married
   - In a long-term partnership
   - Widowed
   - Divorced
   - Separated
   - Never married
   Other (please specify)

5. What is your age?

6. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?
   - Republican
   - Democrat
   - Independent
   Other (please specify)

7. Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please feel free to specify your own identity)
   - American Indian or Alaskan Native
   - Asian or Pacific Islander
   - Black or African American
   - Hispanic American
   - White or Caucasian
   Other or Mixed (please specify)

8. Including yourself, how many people currently live in your household?
9. What is your approximate annual household income?

- $0-$24,999
- $25,000-$49,999
- $50,000-$74,999
- $75,000-$99,999
- $100,000-$124,999
- $125,000-$149,999
- $150,000-$174,999
- $175,000-$199,999
- $200,000 and up

Other (please specify)

10. Do you have children?

- Yes
- No

11. IF you do have children, please indicate their ages, below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Children aged 0-3</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Children aged 4-7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Children aged 8-12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Children aged 13-17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Children aged 18+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
12. In answering the following questions, please think about your current relationships with friends, family members, coworkers, community members, and so on. Please indicate whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>There are people I can depend on to help me if I really need it.</td>
<td>$^1$</td>
<td>$^2$</td>
<td>$^3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I feel that I do not have close personal relationships with other people.</td>
<td>$^1$</td>
<td>$^2$</td>
<td>$^3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>There is no one I can turn to for guidance in times of stress.</td>
<td>$^1$</td>
<td>$^2$</td>
<td>$^3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>There are people who depend on me for help.</td>
<td>$^1$</td>
<td>$^2$</td>
<td>$^3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>There are people who enjoy the same social activities I do.</td>
<td>$^1$</td>
<td>$^2$</td>
<td>$^3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Other people do not view me as competent.</td>
<td>$^1$</td>
<td>$^2$</td>
<td>$^3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>I feel personally responsible for the well-being of another person.</td>
<td>$^1$</td>
<td>$^2$</td>
<td>$^3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>I feel part of a group of people who share my attitudes and beliefs.</td>
<td>$^1$</td>
<td>$^2$</td>
<td>$^3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>I do not think other people respect my skills and abilities.</td>
<td>$^1$</td>
<td>$^2$</td>
<td>$^3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>If something went wrong, no one would come to my assistance.</td>
<td>$^1$</td>
<td>$^2$</td>
<td>$^3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>I have close relationships that provide me with a sense of emotional security and well-being.</td>
<td>$^1$</td>
<td>$^2$</td>
<td>$^3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>There is someone I could talk to about important decisions in my life.</td>
<td>$^1$</td>
<td>$^2$</td>
<td>$^3$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 13. Please indicate whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13. I have relationships where my competence and skill are recognized.</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. There is no one who shares my interests and concerns.</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. There is no one who really relies on me for their well-being.</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. There is a trustworthy person I could turn to for advice if I were having problems.</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I feel a strong emotional bond with at least one other person.</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. There is no one I can depend on for aid if I really need it.</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. There is no one I feel comfortable talking about problems with.</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. There are people who admire my talents and abilities.</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. I lack a feeling of intimacy with another person.</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. There is no one who likes to do the things I do.</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. There are people I can count on in an emergency.</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. No one needs me to care for them.</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
14. We are interested in learning about some of the ways that you feel people have helped you or tried to make life more pleasant for you over the past four weeks. Below you will find a list of activities that other people might have done for you, to you, or with you in recent weeks. Please read each item carefully and indicate how often these activities happened to you during the past four weeks. During the past four weeks, how often did other people do these activities for you, to you, or with you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Once or twice</th>
<th>About once a week</th>
<th>Several times a week</th>
<th>About every day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gave you some information on how to do something.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Helped you understand why you didn’t do something well.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Suggested some action you should take.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Gave you feedback on how you were doing without saying it was good or bad.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Made it clear what was expected of you.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Told you what he/she did in a situation that was similar to yours.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Told you that he/she feels close to you.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Let you know that he/she will always be around if you need help.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Told you that you are OK just the way you are.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Expressed interest and concern in your well-being.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
15. During the past four weeks, how often did other people do these activities for you, to you, or with you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Once or twice</th>
<th>About once a week</th>
<th>Several times a week</th>
<th>About every day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. Comforted you by showing you some physical affection.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Told you that he/she would keep the things you talk about private.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Agreed that what you wanted to do was the right thing.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Did some activity together to help you get your mind off things.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Gave or loaned you over $25.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Provided you with a place to stay.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Loaned you or gave you something (a physical object) that you needed.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Pitched in to help you do something that needed to get done.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Went with you to someone who could take action.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

16. During the past 12 months, how often have you done any of the following things for people you know personally, such as relatives, friends, neighbors or other acquaintances?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Once per year</th>
<th>Several times per year</th>
<th>Once per month</th>
<th>Several times per month</th>
<th>Once per week</th>
<th>Almost daily</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Helped someone outside of your household with housework or shopping</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Spent time talking with someone who was a bit down or depressed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Spent a social evening with someone who lives in your neighborhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Helped somebody to find a job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
17. During the past 12 months, how often have you \textbf{GIVEN} the following kinds of supports to other people, whether or not they live near you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Once per year</th>
<th>Several times per year</th>
<th>Once per month</th>
<th>Several times per month</th>
<th>Once per week</th>
<th>Almost daily</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Lent someone your car</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gave someone a ride somewhere</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Offered someone emotional support through loss, illness/injury, or life changes</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Offered someone practical support through loss, illness/injury, or life changes (like meals, childcare, etc)</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Taught someone skills (cooking, repairs, music, etc)</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Taught skills to children in your community/neighborhood (cooking, repairs, music, etc)</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Talked with someone who was feeling sad, depressed, or anxious</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Offered to share shopping trips to Costco, etc</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Helped with repairs, construction, or moving things</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Helped with gardening or landscaping</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Loaned someone tools, appliances, or other objects</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Loaned someone recreational equipment (skis, bikes)</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Cared for someone’s pets/plants/house while they were away</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Watched or cared for someone’s child</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
<td>$^a$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 18. During the past 12 months, how often have you RECEIVED the following kinds of supports from people in your life, whether or not they live near you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Description</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Once per year</th>
<th>Several times per year</th>
<th>Once per month</th>
<th>Several times per month</th>
<th>Once per week</th>
<th>Almost daily</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Borrowed someone's car</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Got a ride somewhere</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Received emotional support through loss, illness/injury, or life changes</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Received practical support through loss, illness/injury, or life changes (like meals, childcare, etc)</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Were taught skills (cooking, repairs, music, etc)</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Taught skills to your children (cooking, repairs, music, etc)</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Talked to you when you were feeling sad, depressed, or anxious</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Offered to share shopping trips to Costco, etc</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Helped you with repairs, construction, or moving things</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Someone helped you with gardening or landscaping</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Loaned you tools, appliances, or other objects</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Loaned you recreational equipment (skis, bikes)</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Cared for your pets/plants/house while you were away</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Received support through participation in a men's group or women's group</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Someone watched or cared for your child</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
<td>🌟</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
19. Do you currently live in a cohousing community?

- Yes
- No
- I live in an intentional community which is not specifically cohousing

Other (or describe your situation)
If you do NOT currently live in a cohousing please skip to section entitled "Non-Cohousing Residents Only"

20. How many years have you lived in a cohousing community?

21. Approximately what percentage of the TOTAL social support you GIVE (both practical and emotional) is given to members of your cohousing community?

- About 0%
- About 10%
- About 20%
- About 20%
- About 30%
- About 40%
- About 50%
- About 60%
- About 70%
- About 80%
- About 90%
- About 100%

Comments:
22. Approximately what percentage of the TOTAL social support you RECEIVE (both practical and emotional) is received from members of your cohousing community?

- About 0%
- About 10%
- About 20%
- About 20%
- About 30%
- About 40%
- About 50%
- About 60%
- About 70%
- About 80%
- About 90%
- About 100%

Comments:

23. Please list the three most important reasons for your decision to seek or join a cohousing community. What is it about the cohousing model as a living situation that is appealing to you?

#1
#2
#3
### 24. Did any of the following life events impact your decision to seek or join cohousing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Extremely important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Minimally important</th>
<th>Not important</th>
<th>NOT APPLICABLE TO ME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desire to have children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Already having young (age 0-4) children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Already having children (age 5-10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Already having older children (age 10+)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divorce or change in relationship status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retirement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Geographical relocation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Separation from family or previous community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Changes in employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### 25. Please rate the importance of the following factors in influencing your decision to seek or join a cohousing community:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Extremely important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Minimally important</th>
<th>Not important</th>
<th>NOT APPLICABLE TO ME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desire for emotionally connected and supportive relationships with neighbors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Desire for practically supportive and helpful relationships with neighbors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desire to live in a more ecologically sustainable manner</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wanted children to grow up in community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Had positive experience of community living during childhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Had prior positive experience of community living during adulthood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction with traditional nuclear family living models</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
26. IF you moved in to a cohousing community with a spouse or partner, please indicate:

- My partner is male, and he was MORE interested in cohousing than I was.
- My partner is male, and he was LESS interested in cohousing than I was.
- My partner is female, and she was MORE interested in cohousing than I was.
- My partner is female and she was LESS interested in cohousing than I was.
- Not applicable.

Comments:

27. This survey asks many questions about the positive elements of living in cohousing.
Please feel free to comment on what you perceive to be the downsides, drawbacks, and/or challenges of living in cohousing, for you!

28. As compared to your previous living situations, would you say that you feel MORE or LESS socially supported in your cohousing community?

- Much less supported
- Moderately less supported
- Slightly less supported
- About the same
- Slightly more supported
- Moderately more supported
- Much more supported

Other (please specify)
29. Please describe your interest in cohousing: What are the three most important reasons that the cohousing model as a living situation is appealing to you?
#1
#2
#3

30. For you, what are some of the downsides of cohousing or barriers to joining a cohousing community? Please list the three most important drawbacks to cohousing.
#1
#2
#3
31. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your experience of living in cohousing?

THANK YOU for your time, your patience, and for your participation! Your contribution is appreciated! If you have thoughts or questions you'd like to share with the researcher, please feel free to contact me (Elizabeth Markle) at markle.e@husky.neu.edu.