Caring Practices in and Beyond Coworking Spaces

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Abstract Coworking and coworking spaces have proliferated over the last decade, and research has shown how these flexible, shared workspaces provide crucial resources for freelance and self-employed workers. This chapter aims to understand how care is practised in and through coworking spaces. Drawing on interviews with female hosts in different spaces across Europe, we apply Joan Tronto's ethics of care framework (Tronto in Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care. Routledge [43]; Tronto in Caring democracy: Markets, equality, and justice. NYU Press [44]) to analyze caring practices in coworking spaces. This chapter adds to the literature on how coworking hosts and community managers provide care to "maintain, continue, and repair" (Fisher and Tronto in Work and identity in women's lives. SUNY Press [18], p. 40) community and the hospitable atmosphere in coworking spaces across Europe.

1 Introduction

Over the last decade, coworking and coworking spaces have grown worldwide, and so has interdisciplinary academic scholarship on this topic. Growing digitalization and individualization of work with the rise of freelance and self-employed forms of labor since the 1970s fuels the demands of these flexible workplaces [14]. Coworking was announced as a new way of working [12] that encourages the growing share

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of independent modes of working such as freelancing, self-employment or (digital) entrepreneurship to work alongside each other in a shared space and mutually support each other [42]. Ever since, coworking has become diversified, commercialized, financialized and integrated into neoliberal urban and state entrepreneurial policies [27, 30, 34]. Moreover, coworking also spread into different spatial contexts beyond the urban cores of big cities [29]. Increasingly, smaller, more community-led coworking spaces now often grow outside big cities (see e.g., for Germany, [6]). Academic research has mainly focused on understanding why coworkers enjoy coworking and the resources these spaces provide them, such as network formation and supporting entrepreneurial development. Much less attention has been paid to how coworking spaces, despite being framed as 'open' and 'inclusive', might reproduce existing social inequalities around gender, class, or race [26, 39]. For example, in recent years, several women-only spaces have opened and drawn an increasing academic interest in the gender implications of coworking and the notion of coworking spaces as 'gender-neutral' workplaces [2, 10, 25, 36, 40]. Also quite limited is research on the practices of coworking hosts and community managers who have a crucial role in maintaining coworking spaces and their communities [13, 22, 31]. Coworking hosts and community managers are often female and perform affective and emotional labor as part of their work [2, 36, 37]. In this chapter, our aim is to understand the everyday practices that develop around coworkers' needs in coworking spaces and how community managers or hosts try to meet these needs. We explore these practices from a feminist perspective as practices of care and aim to understand how care is practised in and through coworking spaces. With this specific focus, we aim to contribute to a better understanding of the social relationships that coworking can facilitate, the gendered dimensions of these new workspaces and recent debates on care in geographical research. This chapter begins with a brief review of gender inequalities in coworking research, presents our analytical framework and methodology and then discusses findings.

1.1   Gender Impacts and Inequalities in Coworking

In emphasizing the values of collaboration, openness, sustainability, accessibility and community, coworking embodies a progressive narrative [46]. However, there is little critical research interrogating potential social implications and inequalities and mechanisms that might reproduce inequalities. Some scholars have started scrutinizing the gender implications of the new spatiality of work [10, 25, 40]. In 2019, for the first time the annual *Global Coworking Survey*, Deskmag [16] reported that women made up more than 51 per cent of coworkers in coworking spaces. At the same time, there was a significant drop in the female age group between 30 and 50 years [15]. For now, it remains unclear how gender and other intersecting structures (i.e., race and class) shape coworking spaces' organizational logic and coworkers' subjective experiences in these flexible workspaces. For example, Sargent et al. [41] interrogate coworking spaces using Joan Acker's concept of 'inequality regimes',

which are "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations." [1] (p. 443) Their research suggests that gender composition alone may not be enough to disadvantage women in new economy contexts such as coworking, but rather that inequality is contingent upon other organizational logics that segregate genders and reinforce men's higher status (e.g., through pricing policies). They conclude that three critical aspects of coworking organizational logics help weaken inequality regimes in relation to gender: (i) affordable pricing policies, (ii) open-space design/allocation practices, and (iii) lack of policies establishing occupational hierarchies. The looser form of control found in coworking appears critical to forming initial cracks in the foundations of organizational inequality. In their case study on Tribe XX Lab in Nigeria, England et al. [17] show how this women-focused coworking space helps face the multiple challenges women entrepreneurs encounter in Nigeria. The lab helps with business development, education resources, community building, well-being and advocacy and, thus, can be regarded "as a developmental tool to support gender equality and women's economic empowerment in developing economies" [17] (p. 88). Antigoni and Papageorgiou [36] interrogates entrepreneurial labor in Athen's coworking spaces and demonstrates how social constructions of entrepreneurship with their "masculine language, values, norms, and code" (p. 15) impact female workers in those spaces. Informed through this literature and the lack of feminist perspectives in the research field, we apply a feminist care perspective on coworking spaces in this chapter to understand caring orientations and caring relationships that might be facilitated in coworking spaces and through coworking.

1.2 Coworking: A Care Perspective

We understand the rise of coworking spaces as answering the specific needs of freelancers and entrepreneurs and aim to understand what these specific needs are and what practices develop around these needs. To interrogate these needs and practices, we apply a care perspective and understand care in line with recent scholarship in a broader sense as "labour practices and activities—usually gendered—that involve human contact and develop the capabilities and well-being of the other" [3] (p. 728) and whereby care "includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair 'our world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" [43] (p. 103). Therefore, care does not just mean specific forms of 'hands-on' care in "looking after the physical and emotional needs of others" [11] (p. 5) who are vulnerable and dependent such as nursing in hospitals or care homes, teaching in schools or parenting, but where care constitutes "a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life" [11] (p. 5). Care as a human activity "involves taking the concerns and needs…of other[s] as the basis for action [43] (p. 105). Those needs might be more physical such as feeding or cleaning, emotional, social, or intellectual needs such as education.

In applying a care perspective to coworking spaces, we aim to highlight the specific needs of coworkers and the practices, primarily informal and spontaneous, they adopt to meet these needs. We also aim to understand how these practices might help recognize and embrace interdependencies, responsibilities and caring orientations towards others and thus hold political potential [24]. In the same way as freelance workers in creative industries are often depicted as "self-enterprising, self-reliant, self-interested and calculative agents who valorize care-free independence" [4] (p. 135), so coworkers in coworking spaces have been described as individualized, competitive, resource-driven and instrumental (see, e.g., [7, 21]). We assume that coworking spaces might support practices of acting "other-wise instead of self-wise" [3] p. 735; [4, 28] where individual coworkers are not just self-centered and engaging in transactional relations but where the 'caring about' or 'caring for' something or someone is practised and might transform relationships and attitudes among coworkers. In this line of argumentation, in cities coworking spaces might constitute micro-spaces of care [38]. Furthermore, a care perspective foregrounds coworking's affective and emotional dimensions, which are rarely addressed in coworking research [32], forthcoming).

As Tronto and many other scholars highlighted, care is complex and multidimensional. For example, Tronto [45] distinguished five phases of care that she connects with certain attitudes that emerge through caring practices. We use these five phases of *caring about*, *caring for*, *taking care of*, *receiving care,* and *caring* as an analytical framework for analyzing our empirical data.

2 Methodology

We adopted a qualitative interpretive methodology and used semi-structured interview questionnaires that focus on the daily activities of coworking hosts in coworking spaces. To gain a better understanding of caring orientations and practices, we interviewed female operators, managers and coworking hosts as these are often the ones doing the (invisible) work of maintenance and repair in the space and engage in care work [31, 33, 37]. Our sample is drawn from spaces across European countries. We used a selective sampling strategy where we contacted key people inside these spaces, such as founders, managers and community hosts knowledgeable about the daily activities. The specific selection relied on access to these spaces through the research team. Interviews were conducted online and facilitated through the video software Zoom [35] and MS Teams. Our sample consists of coworking spaces operated in four countries, i.e., Germany, Portugal, Slovakia and Ukraine, of different size and type, consisting of a single space or having more branches within the country or internationally (see Table 1). These coworking spaces are located either in the capital cities (Berlin, Bratislava, Kyiv) or other cities of the respective countries (Banská Bystrica, Porto and Vynnitsia). Their location within the cities is also different.

Table 1 Overview of respondents

No	City/Country	Position within the space	Type of space (single/ more branches)	Size of CS
I1	Kyiv, Ukraine	Location/community manager	More branches	>250 (large)
I2	Vynnitsia, Ukraine	Founder	Single	10–49 (small)
I3	Porto, Portugal	Founder and community manager	Single	10–49 (small)
I4	Berlin, Germany	Community manager	More branches	>250 (large)
I5	Bratislava, Slovakia	Community manager	More branches	50–250 (middle-sized)
I6	Banská Bystrica, Slovakia	Co-founder and community manager	Single	10–49 (small)

3 Findings: Giving and Taking Care Through Hosting

Coworking spaces are usually described as a shared work infrastructure that facilitates productivity and sociality [5, 21]. The social atmosphere and "affordances for social connections" [23] (p. 3) distinguish good coworking spaces. Subsequently, many spaces are concerned about how they might get their space socially animated to maintain their community. This work is mainly done through specialist community managers or hosts whose daily work practices of organizing the space and the community are often underpinned by informal care practices. We use [45] framework to identify caring practices from our data.

Caring about

to identify the needs of coworkers, hosts apply various practices. Most explain that *spatial proximity and bodily co-presence* are crucial for identifying needs. Thus, they must be close to coworkers as "the role itself is about people, and I need to be together with them almost all the time" (I4). Many choose to work among their coworkers, and not in a separate office, to be able to greet everyone personally, learn coworkers' names and about their needs:

> We try to work with the people, to ask them what they want to do, what they are interested in, what they miss, simply to maintain the community. And that is one of the main tasks of an office manager: to know about people, to know who is here, what is bothering them and if they want, they could share with us, and that is basically our whole day. (I4)

However, identifying and recognizing needs is not an easy task, and there are different ways in which hosts may learn about specific care needs of coworkers:

> Some people come by themselves, some coworkers talk while drinking the cup of coffee I prepared for them, sometimes their neighbor or other coworker tell me – look, there is something wrong with XY. (I5)

Also, some spaces *limit the number of coworkers* so that they can still provide that 'personal touch in the space', as one host explains:

> I don't like the dynamics of bigger spaces, so I think that 50 is a golden number for coworking spots. (I3).

While for hosts 'caring about' constitutes the core of their professional hospitality activities and the service a coworking space offers, the caring practices are primarily informal and situated, depending on the coworkers' needs and the hosts' skills.

Caring for

The second care phase is about "accepting responsibility and realizing that something has to be done" [45] (p. 6). Hosts explained that, "In everyday communication […] it is important for us that people feel good and we try to meet their requirements." (I6). It was added later that coworking spaces should take responsibility for providing, for example, a safe non-discriminatory working environment, as one host explains with reference to their LGBTI community support: "Everybody should feel good and safe in our space. This is part of our vision" (I6). Accepting responsibility can also extend beyond the needs of the coworkers within the space and address local problems:

> We organize some donations several times per year; we choose something and change: in the past, it was even blood donation. Ukraine, once also for NGO Vagus [dealing with homeless people]. Another example: when we have an event here with catering, we also think of where to place the rest of the food in order not to throw it into the trash. (I5)

Recently, two significant events made many coworking spaces accept more responsibility—the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine during the Russo-Ukrainian War in February 2022. The COVID-19 pandemic affected many spaces at the core of their community and business model, yet most of them recognized that "during the pandemics we all needed support" (I3) and that they needed to take action, whether in providing different types of support to their members (e.g., building a virtual community, organizing meetings groups), by cancelling membership fees if members had financial struggles or rebuilding the space to accommodate new rules. The Russian invasion of Ukraine caused a migration wave from Ukraine's east to the west, and millions of refugees crossed borders into neighboring countries, as will be described in book by Zhurbas et al. The (re)location of Coworking Spaces in Ukraine During the Russian Invasion. In most European countries, coworking associations and individual spaces created support schemes for Ukrainians and offered free membership and desks.

Caregiving

For the actual caregiving, we find that hosts most often give care spontaneously when they meet a coworker and a need is expressed—the caregiving ranges from offering coffee or tea, a listening ear and encouragement to providing information to help coworkers achieve a specific outcome (e.g., pointing out contacts, financial options, etc.). Hosts do not necessarily give care themselves; very often, they connect people and organize appropriate help from inside or even from outside the space. Nevertheless, as one host claimed concisely: "We just provide help." (I4). They mobilize their networks or other organizations to help coworkers with their needs. Much caregiving also happens between coworkers: "Inside coworking, there is always help for each

other among the coworkers." (I3). As already shown by other scholars, this social support and mutual help often extend beyond work-related help into their private life [19, 20, 47]. Caregiving often also extends beyond coworkers and the space. Hosts mentioned initiatives or organizations in the local neighborhood they engage with or where they encourage their coworkers to participate. As one host remarked:

> One of those organizations called Centre for Volunteering has a program to help senior citizens. Volunteers used to shop for seniors, or they simply spent time with them. I know that 2 or 3 coworkers are participating. (I6).

One interviewee from a coworking space in Kyiv provided valuable insights on how coworking spaces have become a vital infrastructure for coworkers and the local community. They mentioned that during the war, these spaces played a crucial role by offering services such as mobile chargers and electricity generators to the community. Additionally, in the event of bombings in cities across Ukraine, coworking spaces served as shelters for people seeking safety. Another interviewee shared that their coworking space provided 24/7 accommodation to individuals at the beginning of the war, particularly those who had been displaced from their homes due to the conflict. These actions highlight the significance of coworking spaces in providing support and assistance beyond their traditional role.

Care-Receiving

In general, most spaces evaluate their performance and ask their members how they do and what they could do better: some use questionnaires, town hall meetings, offer email feedback or have a slack channel, some engage with coworkers, and others ask directly if the needs were met. Our impression was that interviewees were hesitant to talk about care-receiving and whether they met coworkers' needs, as this is not something that is commonly measured in coworking spaces in Europe. However, we know from the industry that care-receiving primarily consists of informal practices, such as the checking in by a community manager or location founder with strong communication skills and empathy who pays attention to coworkers, which is more usual in coworking spaces with less than 100 coworkers. In larger spaces, often a QR code or other technical instruments are used to make a questionnaire and gather feedback.

Caring with

[45] has recently added a fifth phase of care which refers to the societal level of care and whether care becomes a public concern. In coworking, this phase relates to activities where coworking spaces start doing caring work with others. For example, spaces join coworking associations or form networks to advocate overarching aims such as visibility and recognition of the sector or push for certain rights (e.g., the right to remote work). As a host said: "[our space] is a member of Coworking that is a freshly established association of coworking spaces" (I5). Most interviewees acknowledged broader political concerns and engaged in collective efforts to give visibility to local and/or national coworking spaces. Some engage in the creation of associations or alliances to make specific professional fields of their coworkers

more visible, engaging in or partnering with other organizations: "We also cooperate with the Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Informatization due to hackathons […] we also co-organize tech festival […] when the whole staff of the coworking is involved in" (I6). One interviewee said that during the pandemic, they created a local alliance of coworking spaces to cope with the spatial and social restrictions of the pandemic rules but also to promote their services better as "most people lived alone because they are from other cities, had no families here and suffered from isolation" (I3).

4 Conclusion and Future Research: Caring Practices and Gendered Impacts in New Spatialities of Work

Our findings show that hosts' daily work activities are permeated with acts of care— practical and often immediate help, such as giving attention to someone, listening, giving advice, encouraging and validating, showing respect, helping with problem-solving and even hands-on care, organizing childcare facilities for coworkers or financial help in times of crises. Two interviewees based in Ukraine provided numerous examples of caregiving for coworkers and the broader communities since the start of the war and of the commitment of coworking spaces towards the local community in that critical situation. Shelter and essential services were provided swiftly, with no hesitation and no need for extensive corporate meetings, and all actions were exclusively driven by the community's needs. Decisions were taken and implemented by the coworking spaces themselves, without external funding.

Care practices reflect significant changes in the workplace in providing a growing number of independent and remote workers the support they need and seek. Our sample intentionally made up female coworking hosts and community managers, as our aim was to understand how they describe their daily work activities and concrete caring practices. It should be noted that most spaces work with female coworking hosts and community managers and that, for example, reception desks are usually filled with female workers who perform the affective and emotional labor of creating a hospitable atmosphere where coworkers feel 'being cared for' and taken seriously with their needs; as one of the interviewees said, they have to "wear their heart on their sleeves" (I5). Most everyday caring practices are motivated by a specific understanding of coworking (as a workspace that also provides sociality) and constitute an essential part of their labor as community managers and hosts. The care provided in coworking spaces is usually not formally organized, hosts are not trained and are not paid directly for that. However, coworkers pay a usage or membership fee to access the spaces and their services. This "caring as a service" comes with a clearly structured relationship between the caregiver (host) and the care receiver (coworker). However, we also found empirical evidence of this relationship becoming multidirectional and extending into friendship and exchanging gift between hosts and coworkers, as well as evidence of coworkers regularly taking on responsibilities for

the space (see [8]). While most interviewees mainly talked about care for work-related needs, the different types of relationships facilitated through coworking add to the "sources of intimacy, care and support that people use to get through the vicissitudes of life, both major and minor" [9] (p. 618). In fostering and shaping social relationships and the sociality of independent and remote workers, coworking spaces can be places where caring orientations and relationships are produced and reproduced. However, caring can also lead to exhaustion and invisible labor for hosts because of the informality and emotional demands of caring practices "aimed to *maintain*, *continue*, and *repair* a hospitable atmosphere in the space" ([13] p. 2; [37]).

Because coworking spaces provide crucial social, material and emotional resources for freelance and self-employed workers, addressing inequalities in access to these spaces and interrogating how inequalities might be produced or reproduced through coworking [26] is a crucial task for coworking research. With a rising number of independent and remote workers, future research must address these inequalities more thoroughly and understand how care is unequally provided and distributed in and through coworking spaces. In our small sample, we can already see differences across cultural and spatial contexts. A broader comparative perspective, therefore, could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of caring practices in shared workspaces. Also, the size of spaces seems to affect caring practices as smaller spaces tend to create more familiarity and direct interaction between members and staff. Overall, by recognizing and studying the caring practices within coworking spaces, we can better understand the significance of these spaces in fostering supportive work environments and mitigating social inequalities.

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