



# Working with care: embodying feminist care ethics in regional coworking spaces

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

feminist care ethics  
labour  
coworking  
emotions  
everyday practices

## ABSTRACT

This paper extends knowledge on the emotional and social labour of coworking founders. It does so from a cultural geographical perspective by asking how this labour intimately affects coworking founders' everyday lives and introducing feminist care ethics to reflect on it. The paper shows how this conceptual framework helps to shed light on the effects, the temporality, and the ambivalence of this labour. The everyday practices of two coworking founders, Paul and Rachel, are understood through ethnographic fieldwork based on feminist geographical methodologies and conducted in a small regional town in Victoria, Australia. From these understandings, the paper argues that the everyday coworking practices of regional coworking founders are caring practices, aimed to *maintain, continue, and repair* a hospitable atmosphere in the space. Furthermore, it argues that these caring practices are ambivalent and limited, as they can have negative effects on the wellbeing of the coworking founders. Three impressionistic vignettes trace these effects, including exhaustion, discomfort, and resentment. The paper concludes with three suggestions for policy on regional innovation, for coworking research, and for research on feminist care ethics. These include the need for 1) more attention to the effects of care and coworking practices; 2) more focus on the temporality of such practices to better understand their sustainability; 3) increasing research on the intersection between regionality and care, thus inviting research on "cities of care" to also direct its attention to regional areas.

The meeting room I booked for the interviews has a large window looking at the main road to Melbourne, 124 km from here. I placed two chairs facing each other, one voice recorder on the table, at half distance between the two chairs. My phone is recording as a backup. Paul, one of the coworking founders, and I talked for almost one hour. A car with a loud engine makes me suddenly look outside. The road busy with traffic, the big window, the large sign "FOR SALE". The elephant in the room. I still have not asked him about the decision to close and sell the coworking space. I turn back, and I look at Paul. "I have one last question," I announce. "Is it hard to let go of the coworking space?" He tries to tell me in a series of interrupted sentences how he and Rachel, his partner in life and in the coworking business, have not really let go. He tells me about their sadness. About the emotion they still have in "there", in the space. "Ok, thank you, Paul", I smile softly. "There's a lot of emotion in there", he murmurs. "It's good", I justify him. "Is that what you are after?".

## 1. Introduction

Coworking spaces are businesses that provide shared working environments enabled by digital technologies (Richardson, 2017) for location-independent workers, small companies, start-ups and remote teams, usually through a various membership packages.

In small regional towns, coworking spaces are often managed by entrepreneurs, both the founders and community managers, or hosts (I will use these terms interchangeably throughout the paper). These regional spaces, as opposed to entrepreneurial-led and highly commercialised coworking agglomerations (Avdikos & Merkel, 2020), for example WeWork and Regus, are often smaller community-led or bottom-up initiatives. Thus, they heavily rely on the—often not profitable (Gregg & Lodato, 2018)—labour of the founders to support workers, by creating a productive social and material environment and a "hospitable atmosphere" (Gregg, 2018; Merkel, 2019a, p. 61). Literature on coworking has acknowledged the paucity of research on the crucial role of coworking founders (Gregg & Lodato, 2018; Merkel, 2019a), and has since tried to shed light on their labour through the lenses of

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103702>

Received 20 February 2022; Received in revised form 29 January 2023; Accepted 13 February 2023

Available online 9 March 2023

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emotional labour (Gregg and Lodato, 2018) and social curation (Merkel, 2019a). Their research offers a profound qualitative account of the typologies and the nature of labour done by coworking founders. This paper builds on this literature by reflecting on the effects of this labour, an aspect not yet explored by coworking research. It does so in a twofold way.

First, from a cultural geographical perspective, namely, one that looks at the everyday embodied experiences of a place (Cresswell, 2012), it aims to understand how coworking intimately affects the work and life of people in their most habituated and meaningful day-to-day practices (Adey, 2017). The paper thus asks: *how do practices of coworking intimately affect coworking founders' everyday lives?* I understood these practices through ethnographic fieldwork conducted between December 2019 and May 2020, based on feminist geographical methodologies, which advocate for the exposure of emotions throughout the research process. The research ranged across eight coworking spaces located in eight small regional towns in Victoria, Australia. The added regional dimension responds to Gandini and Cossu's (2021) invitation to explore coworking outside the urban environment, thus overcoming what Avdikos and Merkel (2020) have called the "urban bias" (p. 354) of coworking literature.

Second, this paper understands the effects of coworking founders' labour by adopting the conceptual framework of geographies of care, based on feminist care ethics. According to this framework, "care is embedded in all of our encounters and interactions" (Lawson, 2007, p. 3), and it is as a set of relational practices situated in the everyday (Mol, 2008; Raghuram, 2019), aimed to "maintain, continue, and repair 'our world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p. 40).

Based on both this conceptual framework and empirical understandings, and in answering the research question posed above, this paper argues that the everyday practices of coworking founders in regional Victoria are caring practices aimed to *maintain, continue, and repair* a hospitable atmosphere in the space. Furthermore, it argues that these caring practices are ambivalent and limited, as, while they benefit the members and the space, they can also negatively affect the wellbeing of the founders. In other words, these caring practices have *limits* (Bissell et al., 2021), posing crucial implications for the sustainability of coworking spaces. This paper offers a deep dive into the stories of the two founders, Paul and Rachel,<sup>1</sup> of a coworking space in regional Victoria, Australia. Through three impressionistic vignettes, it traces the ambivalence that permeates the embodied effects of their caring practices, including exhaustion, discomfort, and resentment, from the opening of the coworking space in 2014 until its closure in 2019–2020. While acknowledging the richness of my fieldwork, described in Section 3 through an overview of the rest of the interviews, the stories of Paul and Rachel require an in-depth and intimate analysis to underpin the argument this paper wishes to make and to answer the research question it poses.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section will explain what feminist care ethics *can do* for coworking research interested in the labour of coworking founders. This review will reflect on how a care ethics framework helps address two challenges that coworking research is facing: sitting in with the ambivalence of coworking practices and moving beyond research that focuses mainly on internal aspects of coworking spaces. The following section will offer methodological notes on the ethnographic research and on choosing long-form storytelling vignettes to make sense of this empirical richness. The vignettes will follow, each presenting and discussing the empirical understandings. The last section will reflect on three broader contributions of the paper and present suggestions for future research in the context of the covid-19 pandemic.

## 2. (co)Working with care

Drawing upon feminist care ethics (Tronto, 1993, 1998, 2015; Tronto & Fisher, 1990), which argue that "care is embedded in all of our encounters and interactions, even when care is ignored" (Lawson, 2007, p. 3), geographies of care state that "we build spatially extensive connections of interdependence and mutuality" (p. 1). Literature on coworking has already recognised the aspects of mutuality involved in coworking practices. For example, De Peuter and Cohen (2015, p. 309) foster an idea of coworking spaces as "institutions of mutual aid", and Merkel (2019b, p. 535) considers them as "mutual support" infrastructures. Merkel's work also attends to the relational aspects of coworking. Specifically, drawing upon Massey's (1994) conception of relational space, they suggest that coworking spaces are spaces of possibilities created by the intersections of everyday social relationships and interactions. This paper proposes to look at these social and relational aspects of coworking through the conceptual framework of feminist care ethics.

The use of the word *care* is not a novelty in research that focuses on the labour of coworking founders. Gregg and Lodato (2018) borrow Hochschild's (2012) notion of emotional labour to describe the primary function of the affective labour that founders do, namely, to offer members a "sense of being cared for" (Hochschild, 2012 in Gregg & Lodato, 2018, p. 179). Similarly, in their analysis of the role of coworking founders through the lens of social curation, Merkel (2019a) includes "caring" (p. 60) in the list of the material and social practices that founders do to create a "hospitable atmosphere" (p. 61). This paper differs from—while building on—these approaches, because it employs the notion of care epistemologically rather than to describe the quality of the form of labour. Thus, this paper proposes feminist care ethics as a framework to deepen our knowledge of coworking founders' labour. Such depth is achieved in two ways.

First, a feminist care ethics approach asks us to reflect on the effects of the labour of coworking founders. In "Moral boundaries" (1993) Tronto showed that feminist care ethics originated from the idea that human beings are interdependent beings, meaning that we need, receive and give care to others. This is what makes us human beings. In this articulation, Tronto crucially asks the question of *who is caring for whom?* thus inviting reflections on the subjectivities of caring bodies. These reflections open the scope for research examining the effects of care labour on people. Therefore, in the case of coworking, it asks us to reflect on the effects of the labour of care on coworking founders, an aspect thus far not expanded by the coworking literature. Second, the lens of care offers a novel temporal perspective on the labour of coworking founders, with crucial implications for the sustainability of coworking spaces. Specifically, this paper considers care as a set of relational practices situated in the everyday (Mol, 2008; Raghuram, 2019), aimed to "maintain, continue, and repair 'our world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p. 40). Through this definition, coworking founders' everyday practices are caring practices aimed to *maintain, continue, and repair* a hospitable atmosphere in the space. The stress on the words "maintain, continue, and repair" has a crucial temporal connotation. It needs to happen day after day, week after week, year after year, for the coworking business to be sustainable and sustained. As such, care is an iterative and processual series of events that coworking founders do throughout the everyday life of the space. Focussing on the effects of caring practices and their temporality offers vital insights into the sustainability of coworking spaces in time and space.

In the following two sections, I will show how feminist care ethics helps address two challenges faced by coworking research.

### 2.1. Challenge one: to sit in with the ambivalence of coworking practices

The first challenge that coworking research addresses is to *sit with the ambivalence* of coworking practices. The literature has long identified

<sup>1</sup> All participants' names are pseudonyms.

this ambivalence. Some authors (Mould, 2018, p. 52) consider coworking as “individualisation-masked-as-collectivism”, and as an “intoxicating vision of how ‘free’ work can be”. Others attend to its contradictory (Gandini, 2015) and ambivalent (de Peuter et al., 2017; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2021) nature, by arguing that coworking spaces provide care for freelance, casual, and gig workers, victims of neoliberal logics, while their financial sustainability depends on the very existence of these forms of work. To overcome this ambivalence, Avdikos and Merkel (2020) invite a differentiated approach to coworking research, one that considers the diversity of coworking spaces, ranging from commercial and entrepreneurial-led to community-led ones (Avdikos & Iliopoulou, 2019) and more hybrid forms in between. Grassroots initiatives such as community-led coworking spaces sit on one side of the spectrum and function as mutual survival platforms of precarious employment (Merkel, 2019b). Thus, they play an important social role and should be regarded as a kind of community good (Merkel, 2019b). Such diversification of coworking helps to free specific types of coworking spaces from the ambivalence initially attributed to the whole phenomenon. However, while it is crucial for policy development and future research, this paper shows that even smaller coworking operations are not free from the ambivalences, contradictions and paradoxes attributed to the more market-driven ones, even when they have a positive social purpose of supporting local communities. Following Ruez and Cockayne’s (2021) invitation to sit with the concept of ambivalence, emphasising the importance of negativity, together with affirmative positive and reparative practices, this paper does not intend to solve the ambivalence that characterises coworking practices. In doing so, it also follows Avdikos and Pettas’ (2021) invitation to move beyond the dualism of community-led vs market-driven so often attributed to coworking practices. Instead, it proposes to look at such ambivalence through the lens of care.

Care practices are ambivalent (Jupp, 2022; Raghuram, 2019) practices. In their work on commodification of care, Green and Lawson (2011) argue that, through its commodification, care has been moved apart from its social role, intrinsic in people’s relationships. Specifically, they talk about the “care/economy divide” (p. 640) to differentiate, respectively, care practices that belong to the social domain from those that respond to market logic. Such differentiation is similar to the one between market-driven and community-led coworking shown above. For both, the problem is commodification, which takes away the social value of the practice to respond to neoliberal logics of individualisation and profit. Coworking founders of small coworking operations are victims of such neoliberal logics. In their research, Gregg and Lodato (2018) interviewed founders who admit that their coworking spaces are not profitable, but “they want to support workers, rather than benefiting from market-rate real estate” (p.182) or expensive membership fees. Thus, coworking for them becomes less a business opportunity and more a social and personal cause (Gregg & Lodato, 2018). For this reason, founders often experience precarity, yet offer “optimism” (p. 184), care, and support to the members. Such practices are laden with paradoxical ambivalence: while promoting work-life balance and offering a stable place to work, founders often do not experience this stability. The vignettes presented in Section 4 show such paradoxical ambivalence through a form of push-and-pull between wanting to make the coworking business sustainable and profitable and keeping it as a space of caring relationships beyond neoliberal logics of profit. Finally, while being an ambivalent practice, caring is also often inconvenient. Tsui and Bastani (2021, p. 44) emphasise the “inconvenience” of transformative care, referring to the uncomfortable (Bartos, 2018) feeling and struggle of pushing against systemic inequalities and structures that privilege some and neglect others. For the coworking spaces to be sustainable, founders need to apply a membership fee, which excludes some people from using the space. The two founders interviewed often reflect on such tension, which emerged as discomfort and resentment.

In summary, literature on coworking already identified the

ambivalence intrinsic to coworking practices, namely the tension between coworking as products of neoliberal logics (Mould, 2018) and as a community good (Merkel, 2019b). With the aim of exploring, rather than trying to solve, such ambivalence and how those engaged in coworking practices articulate and work within this ambivalence, this paper foregrounds the lens of care as way to look at the labour done by the founders. In doing so, it offers a more nuanced understanding of their labour— one where the nuances emerge in the form of embodied exhaustion, discomfort, and resentment. The following section will explain how feminist care ethics addresses a second challenge of coworking research.

## 2.2. Challenge two: to take coworking out of the coworking space

A second challenge of coworking research is to *take coworking out of the space*. In other words, to move beyond (Avdikos & Pettas, 2021; Merkel, 2021b) research that focuses only on internal aspects of coworking spaces. An internal perspective overlooks the broader material and immaterial networks, relations, and flows that coworking spaces are embedded in. In doing so, it also neglects power and structural forces, precluding an ethical and political role that coworking spaces could play. The proposition of a political project of coworking is not a novelty in the coworking literature. In 2014, Arvidsson envisioned a possible “class recomposition” (in Gandini, 2015, p. 194) initiated by freelance workers, which Gandini re-named the “coworking class” (p. 202). Moreover, in their articulation of coworking as “network sociality” (p. 689) and “infrastructure for mutual aid” (p. 700), De Peuter et al. (2017) already identified a possible politicisation of coworking as a movement that promotes diverse and alternative economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006, 2008) and collaborates with unions and workers’ centres. Similarly, Merkel (2019b), in their article foregrounding the progressive social and political possibilities of coworking, explored how everyday practices of coworking foster mutual awareness and support. Following these arguments, Gandini and Cossu (2021) hypothesised a “third wave of coworking”, one that overcomes the neocorporate model and where coworking spaces are considered “resilient” (p. 430) spaces, which counter logics of collaborative individualism to instead “bring the quality of social relations to the centre of the purpose and ethos of their practice, looking to shape coworking in a direction of developing ‘actually communitarian’ interaction” (p. 435). By considering care as a relational practice “embedded in all our encounters and interactions” (Lawson, 2007, p.3), feminist care ethics frame care as a collective practice, thus countering neoliberal logics of care as an individual practice. A feminist care ethics approach can help coworking research to move beyond the idea of coworking spaces as places where people work alone but together (Spinuzzi, 2012) or where the labour of care is a burden that only needs to be carried by the founders. Instead, looking at the future of coworking through a feminist care ethics lens means embracing the vision of a collective project of coworking, one that re-centres people and their relationships of care in the coworking debate.

Furthermore, considering coworking spaces as sites where relational care is practised foregrounds ideas of them as *spaces of care* (Merkel 2021a, 2021b). In their research on non-traditional spaces of care, such as community drop-in centres, Conradson (2003) defines spaces of care as “a socio-spatial field disclosed through the practices of care that take place between individuals” (p. 508) in their everyday encounters. Moreover, the Care Collective (2020) considers spaces of care as places of belonging, characterised by a system of “mutual support, public space, shared resources and local democracy” (pp. 55–56). Thus, when looked through the lens of feminist care ethics, coworking spaces can be included among these spaces of care, which, in urban areas, range from the household (Dyck et al., 2005; Imrie, 2004; Mee, 2009; Power & Mee, 2020; Smith et al., 2004) to food cooperatives (Williams, 2016), museums (Munro, 2013), cafes (Warner et al., 2013), libraries, and parks (Laws, 2009). In doing so, coworking spaces become a crucial part of wider material and immaterial networks of care emerging in the debates

on cities of care, or care-full cities (Power & Williams, 2020; Wiesel et al., 2020; Williams, 2020), thus taking coworking out of the space, and embedding it in social and spatial flows. This could have crucial implications for coworking literature advancing a political and collective project for coworking spaces.

The next section will offer reflections on the research context and the methodology chosen based on feminist geographies. It will also explain how such methodology informed both the fieldwork and the choice of storytelling as an analytical tool and form of presentation of ethnographic understandings.

### 3. Storying and feeling the effects of care

By exploring the everyday practices of care that coworking founders do as part of their everyday labour, this paper offers a cultural geographical account of coworking practices aimed at understanding how coworking intimately affects the work and life of people in their most habitualised and meaningful day-to-day practices (Adey, 2017). Within this conceptual framework and aim, this paper asks: how do practices of coworking intimately affect coworking founders' everyday life? To intimately understand these everyday practices of care, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork based on feminist geographical methods of research. This methodological approach takes its lead from humanistic geographies, which aim to achieve "an understanding of the human world by studying people's relations with nature, their geographical behaviour, as well as their feelings and ideas as regards space and place" (Tuan, 1979 in Parr, 2014, p. 748). Recognising the crucial importance of such *feelings* in academic research, feminist geographers advocate for the exposure of emotions in the research process and its communications (Parr, 2014). In doing so, a feminist approach to research allows to "access the experience of participants, grasping the more subjective, emotional and relational aspects of their life" (Gobo, 2008, p. 7). In-depth interviews, life-history interviews, and ethnography are crucial methods for grasping such experiences (Parr, 2014).

Based on this methodology, from December 2019 to May 2020, I conducted participant observation, and 37 in-depth life history interviews with (8) coworking founders, (2) community managers, (19) members, (5) people working remotely and living in regional areas yet not working from coworking spaces, and (3) council and government workers responsible for regional innovation and economic decentralisation. The research<sup>2</sup> ranged across eight coworking spaces located in small regional towns in Victoria, Australia, including Torquay, Castlemaine, Warragul, Port Fairy, Swan Hill, Beechworth, and Bright, and one major regional town, Wangaratta. Participants were recruited through a snow-balling sampling strategy, started from the founders met at the FutureAus Coworking Summit in Torquay in September 2019. A note: in March 2020 my fieldwork strategy had to drastically change due to Victoria's lockdown restrictions posed by the covid-19 global pandemic. This prevented me from conducting participant observation in some of the regional areas included in my research plan. Nonetheless, I conducted interviews with participants via Zoom, following an online research strategy (Pink et al., 2015; Lupton, 2020).

Interview transcripts, fieldwork and interview notes were then coded into themes and subthemes. What emerged during this analysis was that most of the coworking spaces founders in small regional towns in Victoria have another business and/or job aside from the coworking business. This happens because most of the coworking spaces in small regional towns are not profitable as stand-alone businesses. Thus, coworking often becomes a social project for the founders (Gregg & Lodato, 2018), aimed at supporting and caring for the local community of entrepreneurs, small businesses, and freelancers. In the interviews,

<sup>2</sup> The research project received ethics approval in December 2019 from the University of Melbourne Human Research and Ethics Committee. Application reference number: 1955663.1.

the will to support and care emerged more than the need for profit. Some founders told me how they want members to feel like they are at "home" in the coworking space and to treat other members and founders like a "big family" (Leah); others mentioned how they want to provide a space that supports members both "professional[ly] and emotional[ly]", by creating both a productive atmosphere and one welcoming for members' families (Ruby). In some interviews, the financial viability of the coworking business was often emphasised as something without which the space would not exist or, if it would, its maintenance might have profound negative implications for the wellbeing, personal and financial, of the founders. Hester, a freelance designer living in South-East Victoria, shared with me her severe burnout while trying to secure a government grant to open a coworking space to support the local artists' and small businesses community, and her depression when she was communicated that she was refused the grant. Eric, founder of a small coworking operation in North-East Victoria, kept raising the concern of being "broke". Finally, Paul and Rachel told me about their decision to close the coworking space after five years of operation because of their exhaustion and burnout in maintaining it while working other jobs.

Given this context, this paper will focus on Paul and Rachel's stories for three reasons. First, their coworking space was the first to open in a small town in regional Victoria, in 2014, and its closure coincided with this research fieldwork in 2019–2020. This allowed me to trace the effects of their everyday labour of care on a temporal scale that covers the whole life of the coworking space, from the opening, through the managing, to the closing. Second, the aim of this paper, profoundly cultural geographical, is to intimately attend to such everyday practices and their effect. Such intimacy requires a deep dive<sup>3</sup> into their life-stories, a process that involves a sustained engagement with their interviews. Third, while not dismissing the interviews that happened via Zoom, my encounters with Paul and Rachel happened before the covid-19 lockdowns, allowing me to live in the small regional town for a week, work from the coworking space, and accompany them in their day-to-day coworking practices. This provided me with a rich ethnographic account, which requires extended analysis.

What follows in the next section are three long-form "impressionistic vignettes" (Bissell, 2021, p. 6) made of a mix of interview transcripts, notes I made during and right after the interviews with Paul and Rachel, memories of the day, and fieldnotes taken during my permanence with them in December 2019. The analysis of such materials is woven through the story in a form of self-reflection. This storytelling-based form of presentation (see Bissell, 2014; Daniels & Lorimer, 2012; Lorimer & Parr, 2014; Pandian & McLean, 2017; Stewart, 2013) was chosen for three reasons. First, to reach the intimacy stated in the research question and to *sit with the ambivalence* of coworking and care practices. Using traditional interview snippets would remove the way I made sense of these interactions, which could erase the ambivalent, uneasy, and confusing emotions that emerged both from my participants and from myself during those encounters. Hence, I follow Rose (2016, p. 209) in honouring "the story that allowed a certain trajectory of thought to happen". Second, long form vignettes invite to consider stories for "their capacity to affect, move, or incite", (Rose, 2016, p. 209) rather than merely evidence. Following feminist methodologies of research, which acknowledge the exposure of emotions throughout the research process, I hope these vignettes make the readers *feel*. At the same time, I recognise that my positionality and interpretations are "singular and situated" (Bissell, 2021, p. 7). Third, this technique allows me to trace the shifting subjectivities (Bissell, 2021) and evolving experiences of the coworking founders, from the opening of the coworking space, through the everyday management, to the closure. In other words, a narrative approach that focuses on understanding the past, while framing the present and the future (Daniels & Lorimer, 2012) helped me to get a hold

<sup>3</sup> For further examples of papers based on one interview account see Bissell, 2014, and Bondi, 2014.

of those temporal aspects of coworking practices discussed in Section 2, which makes visible the effects of the coworking founders' everyday labour. Specifically, through telling the stories of Paul and Rachel, effects of exhaustion, discomfort, and resentment emerged. These three are the themes of the vignettes that follow.

#### 4. Effects of caring

##### 4.1. Opening: exhaustion

It is 8 am on a crisp early December morning. Rachel and I hop in her 1998 Toyota to go to the coworking space. It is an old car they only keep to go around town and to lend it to friends who need a car and do not have one. "It's everyone's car", she says. The drive is short, yet we have some stops to make. "The first task of the coworking founder on a Monday morning", says Rachel, "is to collect the cookie jar". One of the members bakes cookies every weekend. She only works from the coworking space one day a week, so, on Monday mornings, she leaves a jar full of fresh cookies outside her porch. We stop in front of a white cottage. "You go!" exclaims Rachel. I go and get the jar—ginger-brandy cookies. We will then place the jar on the dining table in the kitchenette of the coworking space, where members could grab one cookie, or many, in exchange for a few coins for charity. "This was totally initiated by the member, we like how our community supports local organisations", Paul and Rachel explained to me. We arrive at the coworking space. It is located on a crossroad. One road, north-south, joining two larger regional towns, and one, east-west, going to Melbourne. "A very strategic location", Paul would say, as it is easily noticeable to everyone who passes by, commuters especially. Where now the coworking space and other small businesses are located, there was the bus ticket office. A "funky little spot", Rachel calls it when telling me about the opening of the space back in 2014. "We had an idea and we were ready to roll with it". She explains to me how Paul has been living in this town for 29 years, and her for 12, how they both have a background in community development, how she has been a freelancer for the last 14 years, how lonely and isolated she has gotten working from home, how they developed the vision of creating a better place for people to work, which also could provide a sense of community. Paul had just finished working at TAFE when he attended a conference on the future of work. He always had an interest in supporting people, both motivationally and emotionally. Coworking for him is very much about working independently but together, while supporting each other by just being in the same room. "It was one of those moments..." Rachel continues, "I was sitting on a train commuting to Melbourne...trying to finish my PhD...I was with people I knew in one of those four-seat carriages. And we all just had this conversation of 'just look at this intellectual, creative, economic, social energy that leaves to the city everyday and comes back'".

In opening the coworking space, Paul and Rachel wanted to support local sole traders and micro businesses, which are often left out of state governments' decentralisation and regional development plans. They aimed to challenge "in a big way" the idea that skill and talent must be flown into regional areas. For example, they told me how when the local council organises economic development workshops, it would call consultants from Melbourne or Sydney, who, in Paul and Rachel's words, "don't necessarily know the needs of local entrepreneurs", which are mainly sole-traders and micro-enterprises. "They don't know what people struggle with or how people succeed in running a business by themselves in a rural town. We wanted", Rachel says, "to kind of dispel and disrupt that idea. And to help the whole local enterprising community, and not only the paying members". Paul told me that during some early events they attracted many people who were inspired by how he and Rachel did things. "It was positive. It was all about focusing on that regional community of enterprising people". And to care for people's everyday wellbeing by creating a place where they could work locally, rather than commuting for more than two hours a day. Rachel

told me she had a marketing idea with a friend. "What we need to do is take a fold-out bed down to the train station at five o'clock in the morning on a Winter's day when it's minus five degrees and really cold and you know people frantically getting that express commuter train to Melbourne...and we are in bed under a nice doona<sup>4</sup> with a cute little sign saying 'this could be you and you could still get a full day's work done'". We both laugh vigorously. Rachel laughs more. I can sense a nostalgic feeling in her laugh. "We were doing well", she said, "we just ran out of puff". I remember writing down *out of puff* in my notebook and doodling around those letters. I had never heard that expression before but I quickly realised what it meant. Exhaustion.

In this paper, bodily effects, such as exhaustion, are understood through the lens of feminist care ethics. This approach asks us to reflect on the *who* of *who is caring for whom?* (Tronto, 1993). As explained in Section 2, this question is crucial to focus on the effects of care practices. Picking up a cookie jar for charity purposes, keeping an old car running for community members in need, and opening a coworking space to support the local sole traders and remote workers, are the practices of care that Paul and Rachel have been doing year after year, day after day. This first vignette focuses on *who* Paul and Rachel are, with important implications for the effects of their care practices. Paul is an ex-TAFE employee, specialising in community building and his partner, Rachel, is a freelance consultant expert in international aid partnerships and community development. Their idea of opening a coworking space, rather than from profit and financial feasibility, stems from the need to create a space to tackle the same challenges Rachel faced as a freelance professional: isolation and unproductivity of working from home. Thus, from its first conception, the space was for them an occasion to mix "business opportunities with social and personal causes" (Gregg & Lodato, 2018, p. 182). However, offering support for the same challenges one needs support for can be difficult. Without support, Paul and Rachel ended up exhausting themselves, a bodily state encapsulated by Rachel's expression, "we ran out of puff".

Furthermore, this vignette shows how Paul and Rachel's idea of opening the coworking space aims to challenge the perception of regional towns as backward (Dufty-Jones et al., 2014) and immobile. In doing so, they convey a conception of the coworking spaces not as a bounded space where care is an individual practice only oriented towards paying members. Instead, they *take coworking out of the space* by extending their support towards the wider local community and, ultimately, by questioning the perception of what living and working in a small regional town actually entails. This shows how looking at their practices through a lens of feminist care ethics, to be sure one which considers care as a collective relational practice, helps to address one of the challenges of coworking research. This, as explained in Section 2.2, is to abandon (Avdikos & Pettas, 2021; Merkel, 2021b) research that focuses only on internal aspects of coworking spaces and instead embedding them into wider networks of people and relations, thus paving the way for coworking as a collective project (Merkel, 2019b; Gandini & Cossu, 2021). However, Paul and Rachel's willingness to care for the wider local community creates feelings of discomfort, as the next vignette will show.

##### 4.2. Managing: discomfort

Today I decided to walk to the coworking space. Paul and Rachel arrived there earlier in the morning to prepare the space for the day. Yesterday I helped Rachel to do it. I put clean towels in the bathroom, placed the empty compost and recycling bins in the kitchenette, checked that the printer had paper and ink, and watered the plants. Rachel referred to these tasks as *invisible work*. "I think successful coworking spaces are the ones that are hosted", she said. She defines hosting as "invisible work", which includes "keeping things ticking over, keeping

<sup>4</sup> "duvet" or "quilt".

an eye on things that the members don't...because that's not what they're here to do".

Yesterday, I also became a member of the coworking space, and Paul explained their coworking model to me. "Everyone keeps count of their hours...we don't have electronic sign-ins or membership cards. We try to be as flexible as we can for our members. They pay by the hour, not per day, and they manage those hours as they want". Rachel called this the "irony effect". "Over five years", she said, "we have established a space that offers maximum flexibility, but one of us is tied for 50 hours a week to a brick-and-mortar place because of the way that we choose to run it". Monday to Friday, 9:00 am to 6:00 pm, or 8:30 am to 6:00 pm, hosted. "We didn't want to be open 24/7", Paul told me, "because we wanted people to go home and live. To have a home life".

It is a beautiful morning, so I take my time to walk to the coworking space. I keep wondering if Paul and Rachel could have found a compromise between their values and the financial needs of the space. I also ask myself if someone who truly believes in coworking can be a founder, meaning able to sacrifice their own freedom and flexibility to care for others' freedom and flexibility. I arrive at the space after a twenty-minute walk. I have to choose where to sit. The building has a large kitchen with a backdoor to the parking area, formerly the bus depot, a small windowless lounge, three meeting rooms, a small private office with two dedicated desks, and one large open-plan office with five large tables to share. There are not many people. The members are mostly part-time, as they have other offices in the city or at home. They come to this coworking space once or twice a week, mainly to socialise and have a variety of working locations. "We were expecting more commuters and full-time members", Rachel told me. As it is, their coworking model is not financially viable. They make money out of Rachel's consulting work. Paul insists that they have been keeping this coworking model because it fits their core values, but when I ask him if it is sustainable, he says, "No, not as it is". They mention a few things that could make it more sustainable while remaining independent. For example, setting up private offices to rent, having some funds to hire a community manager, or moving to a smaller place. However, they want to keep the space open, with them being "the personalities at the centre of the community", and with a big kitchen table to keep that crucial "community feeling", as Paul calls it. Also, Paul nervously laughs when telling me this, they have a rental lease that cannot be broken.

This second vignette focuses on the temporality of care. The words "maintain, continue, and repair" in [Tronto and Fishers \(1990\)](#) definition of care showed in [Section 2](#), have a temporal connotation. This indicates that caring practices are a processual series of events, rather than being a one-off situation. This emphasis on everyday processualism is critical to understanding the effects of the labour of care that founders do, something that the lens of social curation or emotional labour, previously used to analyse the labour of coworking founders, do not expand on. Paul and Rachel's "invisible work" of setting up the space happens "Monday to Friday, 9:00 am to 6:00 pm, or 8:30 am to 6:00 pm" all year round, except for major holidays. Because of their "hyper-flexible" membership, they do not know if or when members come in; however, they still need to be there, as Rachel pictures it, "tied for 50 hours a week to a brick-and-mortar place". Her expression is laden with the materiality of time, and with a paradox, which she calls the "irony effect". Intended as "the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite" ([OED, 2022](#)), "irony" here signifies the lack of flexibility that Paul and Rachel have compared to their members. This suggests that founders, by opening a space to promote flexibility and location independence, lose their flexibility and location independence unless they digitalise memberships and access, which would make them less of a personality in the space, losing what Rachel calls the "Paul & Rachel factor". This is ambivalent as they promote a lifestyle they desire but do not have. ([Gregg & Lodato, 2018](#)).

Taking this argument further and tracing it back to the challenge of coworking research in sitting with the ambivalence of coworking practices (see [Section 2.1](#)) — the care that Paul and Rachel put in

maintaining a flexible environment to support members' work schedules and financial needs is ambivalent. Indeed, it has negative effects on their own lifestyle and wellbeing. Aiming to sit with and explore such ambivalence rather than resolve it ([Ruez & Cockayne, 2021](#)), the rhythmic notion of "compression and decompression" ([Straughan et al., 2020, p. 204](#)) helps understand the discomfort that Paul and Rachel experience as an effect of their caring practices. Specifically, such pressure emerges through rhythmic patterns in their sometimes ambivalent way of talking about their experience of opening and managing the space. They go back and forth between sentiments and positions. For example, Rachel mentions the "irony effect" of having one of the most flexible membership models, which conversely ties her and Paul to "a brick-and-mortar place". Similarly, when remembering the first events they ran, she conveys conflicting feelings such as "we were doing well...we just ran out of puff." Furthermore, when Paul talked about how they chose to run the space, he stated that it "perfectly fits" their life, yet when asked whether or not it was sustainable, he answered, "No, it's not". Such rhythmic push-and-pulls and back-and-forths convey a sense of the inconvenience ([Tsui & Bastani, 2021](#)) and discomfort of caring practices, which reached a point of non-return when Paul and Rachel decide to close the coworking business. The following vignette focuses on this closure.

#### 4.3. Closing: resentment

When interviewing government employees working on regional innovation, state-funded grants emerged, which people could apply to, to launch a creative project or open a business aimed to support regional communities. I wonder if this could have been the solution for Paul and Rachel. So, I asked, with dirt under my fingernails, planting tomatoes in Rachel's veggie planters. "We tried", she replies, "but we felt that what we were writing didn't align with who we are or what we're doing". She felt their integrity was being compromised. Their idea of coworking and the type of support they wanted to offer the local community "never seemed to fit" with the idea of economic development that the state government has. One that looks at innovation in terms of tech and start-ups rather than "the real needs" of people who live in or moved to regional areas. "These people", Rachel says, "are not necessarily looking for the new app that will suddenly make 5 million dollars and sell it to Facebook. Instead, they moved to a small regional town for lifestyle reasons, aiming to earn enough money to sustain that lifestyle". Nevertheless, Paul and Rachel kept trying to fill grant proposals out. "There's a lot of energy that goes into it as well", Paul told me. "And that's hard to keep maintaining it year after year after year". I asked him what he means by energy. "It took, still does, a lot of emotional energy", he replied. Especially early on, when they wanted to collaborate with other local organisations, they ended up "hitting a brick wall". But they tried to work with them, but it was not going anywhere and, they kept pushing and pushing to try to make it happen. "We just ran out of puff", Rachel continued, to keep fighting and...we couldn't do it all...we couldn't do it all and keep ourselves healthy. I think", she continued, "we were just juggling too many things, and I think we just got worn out trying to...you can't take on tackling local institutions for a while". And so, in the end, they decided "to do their own stuff".

I feel the pain of hitting a brick wall. In Italian we have an expression for a worthless fight, "lottare contro i mulini a vento", "fighting against windmills". I imagine Paul and Rachel running out of puff fighting against windmills.

And so, they decided to try to close the coworking space. I asked Rachel how she felt about that decision in our one-to-one interview. "People are curious", she said, "you know, in a small town, they wonder what we are doing. Of course, you know, people are concerned that we're leaving town. So, we have been reassuring people, 'No, no. We're not leaving town. You know, the truth is that we had a puff really...we can't...we feel like we've put a lot of ourselves in this. It's time for us not to have to do that. But we still feel very passionately about it. Many

people who talk to us about selling have gone, ‘what a great thing you have done. Such a great concept, really good for [the town]’. People made of assumptions made about how profitable it is. Some think we own the building... lots of that...but we don’t talk about that. People generally really acknowledge [what we have done] and I think is nice because you never know what people are saying and that we were—that’s a stupid word to say—pioneers. We were the only regional coworking space in Australia for a while and there were only a few at the time operating in urban New South Wales and Victoria”. Rachel kept talking, fast, as if in a monologue with herself. “People come to us for advice. Because [people] see us in that role, and we still get that, which is really nice. Sometimes I resent it. Why would I resent it? It’s interesting that I say that. I think unrealistic expectations, whether that’s that concept of expecting stuff...for free, or not really understanding what we are doing, or expecting us to have answers for everything”.

This third, and last, vignette, further explores the discomfort and inconvenience (Tsui & Bastani, 2021) felt by Paul and Rachel in their care practices, and the effect of “resentment” felt by Rachel. Specifically, as shown in Section 2.1, Paul and Rachel experience an uncomfortable (Bartos, 2018) feeling and struggle in wanting to fit in with government grants schemes. Yet, they are “hitting a brick wall”, when trying to collaborate and find support from other organisations. “Hitting a brick wall,” does not happen only once. Instead, Paul emphasises how hard it is to maintain that emotional energy needing to keep trying “year after year, after year”. Again, as explained in Section 2, their caring practices have a temporal aspect, which makes their effects heavily felt. The exhaustion, the discomfort, and the decision to close are not isolated events. They are processual and continuous. Thus, this paper refers to the closing of the coworking spaces as *closure/s* to emphasise the plurality, in time, of this event. This temporal aspect of coworking closure/s contributes to coworking research focused on a more comprehensive understanding of failure in coworking businesses. For example, in their ethnography on a coworking cooperative for social innovation, Houtbeekers (2017) invites researchers to go beyond notions of failure based on business and financial dynamics and to engage with participants’ stories to understand what the closing of the coworking space actually entails. In this case, failure was the consequence of overwork and burnout.

In attending to Rachel and Paul’s stories, this paper takes this invitation further, connecting failure, and thus closure/s, to the ambivalence of care practices and their temporality. Failure is not a one-dimensional event but one of contrasting feelings, of trying and keeping on trying, of unease and discomfort, doubts, and breakthroughs. Of push-and-pulls and resentment. That uneasy and uncomfortable feeling that Rachel expresses when asking herself, “why would I resent it?” and when reflecting on people coming to her for “free” advice. It is the realisation that, for the coworking business to be sustainable, practices of care must be commodified. However, that is not the business model they chose. Commodifying informal acts of caring (see Section 2.1) would make the coworking space less community-focused, impersonal and would not align with their values of collectivity. From these reflections the impossibility for Paul and Rachel to reconcile their will to offer care and support the local community with the reality of the situation emerges. There is a hint of disconnection in their relationships, which becomes reflected in their push-and-pull dialogues. They offer a space hosted for most of the week, but most members are part-time and seldom use it. They proposed several activities to the local council, but their ideas do not align with grant requirements or with the state government’s conception of regional development. They wish to be recognised by the local community, but sometimes they resent being asked for things for free. They do not want to work in isolation, but managing a community takes away the independence required for them to have flexibility. While driven by care, their actions and thoughts are not only ambivalent, but they show limits and disconnections. The next, and concluding section, will further expand on the concept of *limits of care*.

## 5. Concluding notes

Guided by a cultural geographical perspective, this paper aimed to understand how coworking intimately affects the work and life of people in their most habitualised and meaningful day-to-day practices (Adey, 2017). Building on coworking literature focussing on the seldomly researched role of the coworking founders, this paper asked: how do practices of coworking intimately affect founders’ everyday life? The paper looked at the everyday practices of coworking founders through the conceptual framework of geographies of care based on feminist care ethics. Section 2 showed how the lens of care helps to focus on the *who* and the processual *temporality* of caring practices, thus shedding light on the effects of the founders’ labour—an aspect not yet explored by the literature and crucial for questions of coworking spaces’ sustainability. Furthermore, Sections 2.1 and 2.2 showed how considering coworking founders’ labour as practices of care helps to address two challenges faced by research on coworking. One, to sit with the ambivalence of coworking practices, caused by tensions connected to the neo-liberalisation of care, and two, to go beyond research focussing only on internal aspects of coworking spaces and, instead, take coworking *out* connecting it to broader social and political networks. Underpinned by this conceptual framework, and guided by feminist geographical methodologies, advocating for the exposure of emotions and feelings emerging in the research process, ethnographic fieldwork took place in eight coworking spaces in regional Victoria, including in-depth life-histories interviews with coworking founders and members. From these interviews, it emerged that the everyday coworking practices of founders in regional Victoria are caring practices aimed to maintain, continue, and repair a hospitable atmosphere in the space. Through a deep dive into the story of two founders, this paper also understands that such caring practices are ambivalent and limited, as while they benefit the members and the space, they can also have negative effects on the wellbeing of the founders. The paper traced such effects through three storytelling vignettes, including exhaustion, discomfort, and resentment, which have crucial implications for the sustainability of coworking spaces. These understandings further three takeaways.

First, care practices have a crucial temporal processualism. They are not an isolated and one-dimensional event, but one that happens day after day, week after week, year after year. This has important implications for government policy addressing regional innovation. Grants and funding schemes should aim to nourish a project from the beginning, through management, and eventually until the end. Some coworking projects receive launching grants, while this paper shows how also the ongoing management needs crucial support.

Second, care practices have limits. While building upon geographies of care and acknowledging that “care is embedded in all of our encounters and interactions,” (Lawson, 2007, p.3) this paper, through Rachel and Paul’s experiences, shows that care is uncomfortable (Bartos, 2018), and thus troubled (Bartos, 2018; Raghuram, 2016), and risky (Raghuram, 2019), in its potential negative effects on the people who practice it. It is a care that *runs out of puff* and *hits brick walls*. It has a negative side, where negative is intended as something that is not resolvable (Bissell et al., 2021), something ambivalent and that cannot be fully understood. Hence, when analysing the labour of care, attending to the politics of interdependence (Care Collective et al., 2020; Merkel, 2021a) and mutuality becomes as important as attending to the politics of limits (Bissell et al., 2021). This shift does not contradict feminist care ethics, but is complementary to exploring care labouring people, in this case, coworking founders, thus making their work more visible. To ponder on the liminality of coworking practices, as well as opportunities and possibilities, means to be fully aware of the ethics and political responsibilities increasingly involved in the practice, as envisioned by coworking literature (Gandini, 2015; De Peuter et al., 2017; Merkel, 2019b; Gandini and Cossu, 2021). Broadly, and in response to Avdikos and Pettas (2021) questions about the role that coworking spaces might play during the covid-19 pandemic in terms of workforce relocation, a

focus on the limits of coworking practices suggests a need to move beyond research focused on *how to do coworking/future of work right* and instead to crucially understand *what can be done/cannot be done*. Considering the limits of coworking practices also speaks to broader matters of equity. This demands us to ask: who can access these spaces? Who is left behind? Further, what does influence such accessibility and limits? These are crucial questions coworking research, and research envisioning a future role for coworking spaces in the covid-19 driven increasing remote workforce, should engage with.

Third, and to conclude, care practices are “deeply contextualised” (Raghuram, 2019, p. 619). In other words, care practices are situated, and their effects differ depending on the locale. This prompts questions on how regionality affects how care is given and received. In this paper, Paul and Rachel’s locale is a small regional town in Victoria. Following the prolonged covid-19 lockdowns, regional Victoria has attracted a rising number of residents (ABS, 2021) who might benefit from the presence of a coworking space. Thus, it is crucial for coworking research to understand how such regionality affects coworking practices. For example, for Paul and Rachel, regionality challenges the idea that talent and skills need to be brought in from larger cities, and their need to fund the coworking project collides with the state government’s ideas of regional innovation. While from a more micro and everyday perspective, their everyday coworking practices and their decision to close the coworking space encounter the expectations and the rumours of a small regional community. Thus, their practices and their effects would have differed if moved to an urban context. For example, as access to support and community for remote workers is more common in cities, founders’ caring labour could sometimes be alleviated. This has two important implications. Firstly, it suggests that research on coworking should focus more on this regional aspect of the practice, building on Fuzi’s research on coworking and entrepreneurship in Wales, UK (2015), and following Gandini and Cossu’s (2021) invitation to look at coworking outside the urban environment. Secondly, a regional focus is especially relevant if coworking literature aims to consider coworking as spaces or infrastructures of care (Merkel, 2021a). Specifically, literature on care infrastructures (Power et al., 2022; Power & Mee, 2020; Power & Williams, 2020; Wiesel et al., 2020; Williams, 2020), mainly focuses on urban areas and cities, while research on lived-experience of Australian regional futures (Gibson, 2022) emphasises the crucial responsibility that regions have and will have, especially in response to “climate extremity and COVID-19 pandemic” (p. 1). Therefore, this paper suggests that further research on the intersection between regionality and feminist care ethics and practices is urgently required.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

#### Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to David Bissell for his incisive advice and careful support. I wish to sincerely thank the participants who shared their stories and time. I am also grateful to Julie MacLeavy’s supportive editorial guidance and to the three anonymous reviewers for their feedback. I would like to thank mentors and participants at the SOAC21 PhD Symposium, audiences at the 2021 American Association of Geographers virtual meeting, and the 2021 Institute of Australian Geographers virtual conference for listening to the early ideas of this paper. I would also like to acknowledge the financial support of the Australian Research Council Future Fellowship Grant FT170100059.

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