

CONFLICT IN THE COMMUNE: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF LIFE IN AN LGBTQ  
ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY

BY

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the benefits and challenges of living in a modern LGBTQ commune that embraced a Wiccan heritage and a commitment to anarchist principles. Residents of the community cited a plethora of benefits including inclusivity, diversity, safety, educational resources, shared decision making power, and equitable resource distribution. Resident challenges included conflict over socio-economic status and unequal distribution of work. To overcome communal challenges and manage conflict, residents employed Wiccan strategies called “Heart Circles” and a strategy unique to this alternative community called “processing.” Despite their challenges, residents managed to create a safe haven that continually protected and celebrated all forms of queer identity. Implications and future directions for managing conflict in alternative communities are discussed.

### **Introduction**

During the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, there was a large fascination with a reexamination of community structure, marriage, and family life in the social sciences (Rubin, 2001). Rubin (2001) argued that this time for the social sciences was characterized with a focus on emergent alternative lifestyles including communes, open relationships, gay/lesbian relationships, and dual work/career families. Rubin asserted, “Although many of these lifestyles became mainstream topics for family science, those on the fringes have been largely ignored over the past two decades.” (p. 711). While there has been much scholarship on gay/lesbian relationships and alternative family structures, there has been little research on modern communes.

### **Literature Review**

There has been substantial research on same sex relationships and challenges within the LGBTQ community (Quam, Whitford, Dziengel and Knochel, 2010; Rice, Barman-Adhikari, Rhoades, Wintetrobe, Fulginiti, Asto, Montoya, Plant, & Kordic, 2012). However, there has not been substantial research on LGBTQ communities that are entirely self contained or closed off from heteronormative cultures. Smith and Shin (2015) defined heteronormativity, “as the systemic processes in the United States that clearly operate to the advantage of heterosexuals and to the disadvantage of those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.” (p. 1460). Much research on the LGBTQ community is centered on the challenging heteronormative circumstances that queer individuals face when assimilating into mainstream culture. There have rarely been explorations of entirely queer intentional communities that operate outside of a heteronormative context.

While some of the alternative lifestyles Rubin (2001) described have further assimilated into public consciousness, others have disappeared into obscurity. It is speculated that communes have been ignored because many believe that diseases like AIDS and the changing attitudes of mainstream society had eradicated intentional communities (Rubin, 2001). Despite the lack of research on communes- intentional communities still exist.

Seaton (2015) explained that communes have different connotations to the public, but the prominent working definition of a commune is, “Planned communities whose members have common interests in which property is often shared or owned jointly” (Seaton, 2014, p. 217). Bennett (1975) added to this understanding of planned communities when he explained that these communities are usually in a collective mindset, agrarian, and pursue anti-materialistic lifestyles. Some contemporary pieces on modern day intentional communities examined Wiccan covens and reported member benefits as well as relationships with outside neighbors (Smith, 2008). Other intentional communities that have been studied recently include a focus on ecovillages (Lifin, 2014; Cunnigham, 2014). Research on ecovillages often described how the shared sustainable living values of residents made a positive impact on the environment (Litfin, 2014). Renz (2006) examined individuals who shared living facilities and the decision making challenges they encountered. But while these contemporary pieces gave brief overviews, few pieces examined issues surrounding membership benefits, resource distribution, or unique styles of conflict management.

This study filled both a gap in exploring both exclusively queer communities and intentional communities. This was accomplished by examining an LGBTQ intentional community in the Southeastern United States. Furthermore this community, referred throughout the study as Safe Mountain, operated with anarchist principles that prevented the community

from having any formal leadership or hierarchy. Unlike other research on communities that utilized consensus based decision making with formal committees or group facilitators to guide the process, Safe Mountain had no committees or organized structure at all. This all queer community made decisions with consensus based decision making during sessions called “family meetings”. In addition to the anarchist principles that embraced diversity and eradicated aspects of heteronormative culture, members of the community also valued a Wiccan heritage. Overall the members of the community in this study represented many groups that had not been closely studied over recent decades.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how participants understand the benefits and challenges of membership in their intentional LGBTQ alternative community. Data was collected through semi structured interviews with subjects who participated within Safe Mountain. The research questions answered were:

RQ1: What are the benefits of living in the Safe Mountain community?

RQ2: In the highly collective queer Safe Mountain environment, what factors spark conflict?

RQ3: How is conflict managed at Safe Mountain?

### **Procedure**

As I had never been to a place like Safe Mountain and did not know anyone who had, I possessed minimal knowledge of communes or intentional communities. Because my subject matter was so completely foreign to me I was without presuppositions which made naturalistic inquiry and inductive reasoning the best way to approach the study (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p. 258). In addition to using techniques of naturalistic inquiry, semi structured interviews were used to keep concepts open ended (Whyte, 192). The interview protocol was purposely structured to allow participants to introduce any information they felt accurately reflected their experiences.

Overall, the open-ended and exploratory interpretive approach allowed for a rich and multifaceted overview of the rewarding and challenging aspects of Safe Mountain.

### *Sampling and Data Collection*

Within the Safe Mountain community there were permanent residents, people who lived as temporary residents, and people who were classified as neighbors of the community.

Neighbors lived near communal grounds in nearby cabins or straw and mud huts but still participated in communal events. Some of these communal events included pot lucks, resident meetings referred to as “family meetings”, or festivals called “gatherings.” The population of Safe Mountain fluctuated throughout the year but could range anywhere from thirty to a few hundred people. The population would spike during gatherings that occurred twice a year- once in the fall and once in the spring. Gatherings were opportunities for outsiders to explore Safe Mountain in harmony with residents. Visitors made art, ate, celebrated, attended workshops, and engaged in Wiccan practices during gatherings. Each participant was a single Caucasian male who identified as queer, homosexual, bisexual, or pansexual. Each participant identified with both the anarchist values of the community and the Wiccan traditions that influenced community life.

To collect data I used purposeful sampling to recruit participants (Creswell, 1998). The shortest amount of time spent at Safe Mountain before the interview was conducted included a participant who had lived there for 90 days. The Safe Mountain resident who had associated with the community the longest had been there for more than 7 years before he was interviewed for this study.

Unlike most intentional communities that are completely closed to outsiders, Safe Mountain was a completely open intentional community meaning that they were willing to

accommodate newcomers to the community year round. Even though Safe Mountain was a completely open and accepting community, the location of the community was only spread through word of mouth or through direct access to a gatekeeper. Snowball sampling became essential for finding qualified participants to study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

While on the grounds of Safe Mountain, I conducted an artifact analysis and observed a resident meeting in addition to interviewing residents (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The meeting I observed helped me gain perspective on how communal resources were shared. The artifact analysis was on an item of major significance to the Wiccan values of the community- the sacred maypole. Analyzing the significance, physical structure, and meaning behind the sacred maypole supplemented the aspects of acceptance and diversity that participants described during their interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

#### *Data Analysis Procedures*

Interview transcriptions, totaling 82 pages double spaced, were evaluated with in vivo and axial coding through the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After reading the transcripts I conducted a line by line analysis of in vivo coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Once I had the list of in vivo codes, I began axial coding. During the axial coding process I grouped similar in vivo codes together and put emphasis on themes that were common amongst multiple participants. I also included forceful opinions as disconfirming evidence to verify the findings. I went through three rounds of axial coding in which I organized and reorganized the data to identify the emergent themes.

For the analysis of the community meeting I observed I was unable to record the meeting due to issues with the environment where the meeting took place. During the meeting I took field notes to help conceptualize the topics that were discussed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). After the

meeting I was able to record a memo giving an account of observations that I could refer back to later in the thematic analysis process. There were no new themes identified during the observation, rather observing the meeting just confirmed topics already mentioned by participants during the interviews.

During my time at Safe Mountain I also photographed artifacts so that I could have pictures to refresh my mind during the analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2001). While I took many photos of the grounds, I chose to analyze the sacred maypole because of its relevance to the themes related to benefits of Safe Mountain membership. Just like the family meeting observation, the analysis of the sacred maypole supplemented findings from participant interviews.

### *Verification*

Three verification strategies were used in this study: detailed coding description, triangulation, and disconfirming evidence. In order to bring understanding of the participant experience and establish the most prominent themes I engaged in microanalysis including open, axial and in vivo coding. Since this study was rooted in a multifaceted and complex environment, I also used triangulation to verify the study's findings. The triangulation of this study consisted of artifact analysis and observation. Analysis of artifacts in the community space helped measure the transferability of the thematic findings on diversity in the Safe Mountain community. To verify the transferability of findings on shared resource distribution, I also observed a family meeting that took consensus on upcoming community events and the distribution of communal finances. The final method of verification utilized in this study was disconfirming evidence. Negative evidence increases the depth of analysis by exploring multiple

viewpoints (Creswell & Miller, 2000). These forceful opinions confirmed the context and intricacies behind the themes that developed.

Due to the sensitive nature of this study, great efforts were made to ensure that this study met ethical standards and considerations. Participants were assigned a pseudonym and I excluded any general information about the location of the community (Creswell, 2009). As a researcher, when you are dealing with a population that deviates from social norms there can be a temptation to report findings simply because they are provocative. Out of respect for my participants and to uphold the integrity of the study nothing was included unless it was truly an emergent theme central to the experience of living in Safe Mountain-nothing was included for shock value.

### **Findings**

The data for the research findings of this study came from a set of three participants who had rich and in depth descriptions of their experiences at Safe Mountain. All of the participants are referred to with a pseudonym to protect their identity. It is pertinent that I give a short background on each participant to help contextualize the findings.

The first participant is referred to as Kiki. Kiki had by far the most experience living at Safe Mountain as he has lived in a nearby cabin for over 7 years. Though Kiki did not actually live on the property, he participated in most major and minor happenings at Safe Mountain. Kiki was an excellent informant because he was deeply tied to the residents who lived on the grounds of Safe Mountain as well as the neighbors who were heavily involved in the community but lived in nearby vicinity.

The second participant was JB. JB was in his early twenties but had lived in a variety of intentional communities before he came to Safe Mountain, many of which were exclusively for LGBTQ populations. JB was the newest participant to Safe Mountain and had been a temporary

resident for 90 days. While JB was still learning the intricacies of the community, he offered an excellent perspective as he had not fully assimilated to the Safe Mountain community.

The third participant was Major. Major had made a pilgrimage to Safe Mountain either annually or biannually for the last five years. Major was considered a temporary resident who usually spent one to two months living on Safe Mountain grounds each year. Major heavily identified with what he referred to as “the magic” of Safe Mountain and offered excellent perspectives as he has seen Safe Mountain grow and evolve over a significant period of time.

The following themes address the benefits of living in the Safe Mountain community, the challenges of communal living, and unique conflict management styles. Throughout the findings section you will see direct quotations from participants.

### **Findings**

While it is evident that intentional communities still exist, it is not exactly clear why someone would choose to live in one. There were some obvious disadvantages to collective living at Safe Mountain described by participants including lack of jobs in the local area, an unequal distribution of labor, and conflict between residents. Despite disadvantages, the participants agreed that the plethora of benefits at Safe Mountain made it a special and “magical” place to them. Some benefits listed by participants included: positive intentions of each individual in the community, a commitment to diversity, strong feelings of belongingness and acceptance, a place for healing, and the chance to learn new things.

*Intention to be in community.* No one came to Safe Mountain by accident, and since the residency process was so long and intensive those that became residents were truly committed to the community. To be a resident of Safe Mountain, an individual would have to live on property or nearby for at least a year. Once a year has passed, the individual would have to apply for

membership at a community meeting, and then the individual would have to leave for two weeks so the community can take a consensus on whether to allow the individual to be a part of the community. The community did not have a standard process of making decisions on residency but the individuals were usually evaluated on whether or not they make a positive impact on the community.

Participants explained that one of the most beautiful things about Safe Mountain was that those who chose to be a part of the community had deliberately sought it out. Kiki explained this when he stated, “The fact that it’s an intentional community brings people that live there, people who visit and people who live in the neighborhood all come with intention” (Kiki:2). The intention bounded the residents of Safe Mountain to one another in powerful ways. The intention of residents and visitors for Safe Mountain were reflected in part by the inclusive language used by the entire community. Instead of pronouns like “they” or “them” the community stressed inclusive pronouns like “we” or “us.” The focus on intention and inclusive language led residents and visitors to take ownership of Safe Mountain. Safe Mountain belonged to each person who answered the call to abide by its values and keep peace with its residents.

*Diversity and acceptance.* JB described the type of acceptance and diversity he saw at Safe Mountain. JB used terms like “sexual outlaws” (JB: 47) and “gender deviants” (JB: 47) to reflect how the outside world viewed members of Safe Mountain. Furthermore JB taught me that Safe Mountain was a, “sexual sanctuary in that people aren’t condemned for how they love or who they love or what their sexuality looks like” (JB: 47). Way before gay marriage was passed in the United States and before the American public could start to have serious conversations about gender identification or sexual orientation, Safe Mountain had welcomed people who were queer and proud to be different.

Major echoed JB's sentiments when he explained that Safe Mountain was a place where diversity was fully accepted and celebrated. Major stated, "You have to be able to appreciate everyone for what they bring to the table" (Major: 56). To the people of Safe Mountain the diversity of men, women, people of color, transpeople, indigenous people, and everyone else spawned a deep commitment to cooperation and inclusivity. This connected with one of the most sacred artifacts on the property- the maypole. The maypole is a tradition first incorporated by European villages and now adopted by the Wiccan community to symbolize fertility and fruitfulness for the land and the people who occupy it. Traditionally the maypole is just a phallic wooden pole, adored with simple ribbons and put into the ground after ceremonial incantations and blessings. However, the maypole at Safe Mountain was quite different with more of a postmodern look. Safe Mountain's maypole was adorned with a variety of flashy fabrics, wigs, dolls, and geometric statues. This unconventional approach to the maypole signified that chaos and diversity can make something beautiful- it was a reflection of the community itself.

Ultimately the diversity of Safe Mountain connected to the purpose of this place. A purpose that had been central to the community since its founding back in the 1970s to, "Provide a safe space. That is really hard when you're talking about people from every different background you know" (Kiki: 4). Each participant unanimously described the community as a safe place and a sanctuary from the outside world for all queer people from a variety of backgrounds.

*Learning and knowledge.* Each participant expressed that they had been given the privilege and space to learn and adopt a new passion at Safe Mountain. Throughout the year there were guest speakers, workshops, and intercultural events. Major described that a resident of Safe Mountain had access to a multitude of knowledge:

In any number of subjects. Of course there's yogi masters in attendance all the time. There are fermentation specialists. There are, builders, there are dancers, there are musicians, and in addition to having those people there in a place where they can share their talents and you can learn from one another. (Major: 58).

Other participants agreed with Major's description when they described the new passions they were able to discover and develop at Safe Mountain.

*Benefits and resources allotted fairly.* When explaining the benefits of the community, I asked each participant if they believed the resources were distributed fairly. Each participant affirmed that, "Resources are generally and are allocated strictly in ways that benefit the entire group or the entire community of those who live there" (Major: 79). No one felt that resources were unfairly distributed regardless of a person's residency status or standing in the community.

The community ran two events a year called "gatherings." When a gathering took place, the Safe Mountain community opened itself so hundreds of visitors had a chance to explore the Safe Mountain community and practice communal living values. The gathering requires no upfront costs or registration fees but the residents of Safe Mountain ask for donations to help offset the cost of the event (food, cleanup, any necessary renovations) and sell artisan products. Often the gathering results in a profit for the Safe Mountain community and this money is put into a communal fund. This fund is managed by two elders of the community that provide financial updates at the weekly family meeting. The money is usually apportioned to communal needs like soap for the facilities or food that cannot be grown in community gardens. However, if a resident is in desperate need of financial help for needs like health care or travel, it is possible for an individual to take a loan out of the communal fund.

During a family meeting, I observed an individual asking for a loan out of the resident savings fund so he could travel and visit family for Thanksgiving. In the individual's request, he outlined a plan of odd jobs he could do along the way so he could payback his loan to the

community. It was explained during the meeting that if anyone took money from the community fund for individual needs that it must either be paid back or the community must agree in consensus to gift the funds to the individual. Observing the loan procedure further showed how no one could have greater access to community resources than others.

*A place for healing and restoration.* When talking about the ways residents maintain the community it was also important to recognize that participants described Safe Mountain as a place of refuge. There are residents of Safe Mountain who suffer from AIDS, physical disabilities, or various mental disorders. Kiki explained the difference between those who work and those who are provided for: “There are two people who don’t work... They have a lot of work they do on themselves and I think a lot of people realize they need sanctuary as opposed to providing it” (Kiki: 41). All participants unanimously mentioned the necessity of Safe Mountain being a safe place where those who need help can find it. The men and women of Safe Mountain focused on caring for the sick and providing a place where people could work towards recovery.

Being in a diverse community with people from all walks of life can sometimes lead to conflict. Residents of Safe Mountain described the challenges of communal living which included unfair labor distribution, conflict over socio-economic status, and fear of change. These challenges manifested themselves in menial everyday tasks including doing the dishes as well as bigger decisions including admitting new members.

*The dishes.* When asked if the labor required to maintain Safe Mountain was equally distributed, each participant answered with a resounding “no” and cited dirty dishes as a concrete example. Major synthesized the struggle over dirty dishes:

On one side it’s common and simple and not a big deal on the other hand it’s something that is always present and you know always right in the kitchen and gathering place. And so you can be sitting in the kitchen for a couple weeks straight and there’s just a giant pile of dirty dishes. (Major: 60)

Other participants explained that as dishes were dirtied and piled up over time, the more resentful members of the community grew. Participants described that this resentment made members of the community less willing to help out and clean dishes. The more urgent it became to wash dishes, the less helping hands were available.

*Some do more work than others.* Just as all participants confirmed that work was unevenly distributed, each participant identified that some worked more than others to maintain the community. Major explained that, “there are certainly times where people are not carrying their weight very well.” (Major: 59). Other participants described that the community garden had too few people working it, only two people maintained a huge garden that provided crops for the entire community. Another participant described a situation where one person was assigned to keep the main community building clean and he had to sweep it four times a day before giving up on the assignment.

*Conflict over socio-economic status.* In addition to unfair labor distribution, participants reported that difference in socio-economic status caused conflict in the community. While the financial resources of the community were evenly distributed to residents of Safe Mountain, some people started their life at Safe Mountain with more wealth than others. Some residents lived in tents or pueblos made of straw and mud and others were able to become neighbors of the community by building homes nearby. Kiki explained that the neighbors had their own pot luck events at a home with indoor plumbing, electricity, and even a hot tub. When Kiki first moved to the neighborhood surrounding Safe Mountain, he thought that the neighborhood pot lucks were his favorite, but later his views changed. Kiki elaborated, “It’s like a white landowner’s pot luck. And it’s a very bourgeois not normal worldview that that I don’t really—that’s not why I moved to the neighborhood.” (Kiki: 13). Some residents of the community were disturbed by the gaps in

quality of life for those who came to Safe Mountain with much as opposed to those who came destitute.

This tension was only heightened by the lack of available job opportunities in the area. While some residents of Safe Mountain decided to work and lived off the land, other residents needed money from time to time to pick up personal supplies or visit other cities. Kiki described the struggles of finding available work when he stated, “Getting a job and having money in the neighborhood is very difficult.” (Kiki: 17). To cope with the lack of available work, Kiki would sometimes take sabbaticals from his home at Safe Mountain where he did odd jobs for money to travel and visit other intentional communities.

*Different approaches to tasks.* Major explained how the varied socio-economic status of Safe Mountain members created different approaches to problem solving. Major described this in the context of grocery shopping, “There is someone that may want to go around back and get everything from the dumpster. While others that feel that that’s unsafe. Um so, those things can, boil up at times” (Major: 59). Oftentimes socio-economic status of the residents affected their input on how the community’s money should be spent- with some willing to spend more money than others.

*Fear of change.* While residents focused on harmony and peace in the community, conflict could be sparked by a fear of radical change in the community. Since the community operated on anarchist principles, the core values of Safe Mountain were dependent on the current residents. Previous groups of residents had operated Safe Mountain in different ways- such as not allowing new residents for a 6 year period at one point. Kiki stated, “Because it’s an anarchist community, because the people it can very easily become changed. There could be people who come, stay, kick out the people that live there now and change what it is” (Kiki: 29).

There was a deep need for unity, peace, and harmony so that Safe Mountain could operate as a safe haven for members of the LGBTQ and Wiccan communities. Other participants echoed Kiki's concern that the anarchist values of Safe Mountain could change the nature of the community as decisions did not follow any specific framework and were not based on precedent.

Participants described the unique challenges of communal living at Safe Mountain and also described the conflict management strategies used to overcome these challenges. Conflict management strategies included a technique called "Heart Circles" which were rooted in the community's Wiccan heritage. In addition to "Heart Circles" participants also described a conflict management strategy unique to Safe Mountain called "processing."

*Heart Circles.* In addition to Safe Mountain being guided by anarchist principles, it was also a community heavily influenced by Wiccan practices. Residents of Safe Mountain used a Wiccan approach to conflict management called "Heart Circles." In a Heart Circle individuals came together as a group and shared their perspectives by passing a talisman to one another. Similar to how Native American tribes use talking sticks, the talisman gave a person in a Heart Circle the ability to speak while everyone else actively listened to the speaker. Kiki had been in more heart circles than any other participant. He explained:

They may be having a Heart Circle about a certain topic but they can say whatever is on their mind and no one stops them. There's no cross talk. There's no blaming anybody. There's no talking about one person. (Kiki: 34)

A Heart Circle is a way for people to feel heard and valued. This Wiccan practice provided a safe space to work through conflict and restore relationships in the community.

*Processing tension with peers.* Another way of coping with conflict for the individuals at Safe Mountain was referred to as "processing." Major described the first time he heard this term used and explained how prevalent it was in the community. At one point there had been a

resident of Safe Mountain who had a psychotic episode and presented a threat to others. This resident was asked to leave the community and he left the community to get professional help. A few months later and completely unannounced, another resident of Safe Mountain welcomed this man back and deliberately neglected to consult others or warn people of the individual's return. Major explained that other members of the community were unhappy and frightened by the individual's return to Safe Mountain. That day, Major saw people asking each other to process their feelings and opinions about the controversy. Processing involved sharing feelings and talking through topics together- it was often emotionally cathartic for those involved. Major explained the value of this practice by stating, "I think everyone um, appreciates and values that that feature of this community that that they acknowledge that we need time to process things and sometimes we need someone else to process with us." (Major: 64). Just as the citizens of Safe Mountain represented a diverse group, the ways that members of this community managed conflict is also varied and represented a multitude of different perspectives.

*The magic of this place.* When talking through the disorganization and challenges of living in Safe Mountain, each participant used the term "magic" to describe their experience of Safe Mountain as an exceptional community. Kiki elaborated on this concept:

There's no structure as to getting them [various tasks] done. They just happen. Like all of a sudden 450 people show up and there's meals on the table for them. And there's magically all the cups they need and all the water they need and all this and that. Things just magically happen and I think that's because the intention, the passion that people bring and the intention that people bring. (Kiki: 44)

Living at Safe Mountain may get chaotic at times, especially on a logistical level. But despite the craziness and the tension that comes with being a part of this unconventional place, participants described the beauty of belonging to a community with such unique and rewarding experiences.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine benefits and challenges in a LGBTQ intentional community that operated on both Wiccan and anarchist principles. The research illuminated the community benefits that drew people to Safe Mountain and the pragmatics of managing communal challenges. Due to the substantial lack of research on life in intentional communities, many of these findings are significant to understanding how participants actually experienced day to day life in a queer alternative community.

The first research question asked: What are the benefits of living in the Safe Mountain community? Participants each described a wide range of Safe Mountain community benefits. Each member of Safe Mountain came with the intention to be in community with other residents, everyone there were adults who lived there of their own volition. This echoed Seaton's (2014) assertion that intentional communities consisted of individuals who shared a common vision or purpose. In addition to shared visions and purposes, members of Safe Mountain relied on each other to meet basic needs- whether it was clothing, shelter, food, or fiscal resources.

One of the resounding and unanimous findings about the communal benefits was that Safe Mountain was a safe haven for people of diverse backgrounds who identify as queer (whether it be lesbian, gay, transgender, or any identity that deviated from normal sexual and gender conventions). Participants described Safe Mountain as a sexual sanctuary. This finding was complementary with Smith and Shin's (2015) assertion that heteronormativity had created such deep systemic forms of oppression that some queer individuals actually had to remove themselves from mainstream culture to find solace in a like minded community. The founders of Safe Mountain felt that they could not explore their full potential as queer in a heteronormative

community. This explained Safe Mountain's strong emphasis on creativity, artistic freedom, and diversity of knowledge.

Cunningham (2014) explained how ecovillages present a benefit of helping impact natural environments through a focus on conservation and sustainability. Each intentional community hosts its own unique array of benefits to its members. At Safe Mountain each participant was vocal about the endless opportunities to learn new skills. From yoga, visual arts, Reiki healing, and fermentation techniques there was a great variety of learning opportunities. Each participant affirmed that during their time at Safe Mountain they learned something new or rediscovered an old passion. This finding connected to aspects of Smith's (2008) description of a Wiccan coven, specifically that communities who come together over a shared vision or purpose often prioritize education in their community.

In addition to detailing benefits of Safe Mountain, the findings of this study detailed that the shared resources of the community were distributed equally. While observing a family meeting, a resident of Safe Mountain asked for a personal loan. During the meeting the distinction was made that fiscal resources either benefit the collective group or if they do help one individual (like a personal loan), that individual must either repay the amount of the community must all agree to gift the funds to the member in need. This was a new finding unique for queer intentional community that shared financial resources.

In addition to being a safe haven from heteronormative societies, Safe Mountain was also a place of refuge for the weak, the sick, and those that needed to work on themselves before they could serve others. From a queer perspective it was admirable that the residents of Safe Mountain cared for individuals who suffered from AIDS who otherwise would be forced to fight the disease alone. There has not been a study on the incredible philanthropic impact that queer

intentional communities had made by providing a safe place free from a heteronormative culture that might stigmatize diseases such as AIDS. This finding was unique to this study as queer intentional communities have been marginalized in the last few decades of research on alternative lifestyles.

The second research asked: What factors contribute to conflict in alternative communities? The emergent themes that answered this question explored the labor distribution and socio-economic factors that spark conflict at Safe Mountain. Although participants reported challenges, each participant emphasized the need for communal harmony.

In her study on a cohousing community, Renz (2006) identified that value differences had the potential to create conflict if not explicitly communicated. The research on value differences applied to the conflict in the decision making process but did not specifically address interpersonal relationships in the cohousing community (Renz, 2006). The participants in this study explained that difference in socio-economic status sparked conflict on an interpersonal and a collective level. Some members of Safe Mountain thought there was a significant difference between those who came to the community with previously accrued wealth and those who came destitute. One participant explained differences in community events with some residents that seemed bourgeois and antithetical to the purposes of the community. Another participant even explained how differences in socio-economic status led to differences in approaching group tasks. The clearest example given was that of grocery shopping, where Safe Mountain residents who came from a lower socio-economic status background might be prone to find groceries in the dumpster (commonly referred to as dumpster diving) while others might be repulsed by the idea. It was clear that even in a community that focused on shared resources, equality, and inclusivity that conflict could still arise from differences in socio-economic status.

In addition to conflict over socio-economic status, there were also challenges surrounding unfair labor distribution at Safe Mountain. Members of the Safe Mountain community affirmed that some worked too hard for the community's survival. Oddly enough, the unanimous example that participants gave were the dishes. Apparently dirty dishes piling up week after week were consistently a point of conflict and tension for the entire community. In a way, the piles of dirty dishes became artifacts themselves-symbolizing the problem of labor distribution in the community. One participant even explained how outrageous it was that only two people take care of the massive community garden. This finding was unique to Safe Mountain as the population of residents and visitors fluctuates during the year.

The participants each communicated that Safe Mountain needed to be a harmonious community. In addition to shared visions and purposes, members of Safe Mountain relied on each other to meet basic needs- whether it was clothing, shelter, food, or fiscal resources. Disharmony could hinder the collaborative work needed to provide basic needs to the entire community. An important finding from this research came from a forceful opinion of one participant who explained that the community had to cooperate for survival. The anarchist principles that guided the community meant that whatever the community did relied on current members. This participant expressed the real fear that new people could move to Safe Mountain and change the nature of the community. The community had so little structure and no set precedent for decision making so there was a real threat of shifting opinions that could change the core values of Safe Mountain. In anarchist intentional communities members must live in harmony and cooperation with one another or face the threat of extinction. This finding was new to the area of intentional communities.

The third research question asked: How is conflict managed at Safe Mountain? Residents of Safe Mountain described unique conflict management styles. There has been past research focused on Wiccan covens and how these covens manage conflict with outside groups, but there has not been substantial research on unique Wiccan interpersonal approaches to conflict management (Smith, 2008). While Safe Mountain was not exclusively Wiccan and cannot be considered a coven, many of its members identified with Wiccan ideology and tradition.

A significant new finding was the explanation of Heart Circles as a unique Wiccan practice to approach conflict management. In Heart Circles individuals came together to speak on a certain topic or a number of topics. Individuals passed around a talisman to signify who has the right to speak at any given time (much like a talking stick in Native American culture). There was no cross talk allowed during a Heart Circle and individuals were not allowed to put blame on other people. Heart Circles incorporate active listening, group participation, and emotional catharsis as a means to manage conflict and bring restoration to the community.

In addition to Wiccan ways of approaching conflict management, members of Safe Mountain also used a form of conflict management unique to their community called “processing.” Processing was similar to Heart Circles in that it allowed members to vent feelings and perspectives in a way that served as emotional catharsis. But processing could also include a host of different meanings depending on the individual involved. Processing could mean reasoning something alone or with another person, complaining, making a personal decision, expressing emotional reactions, expressing concerns, or sharing important narratives. Processing was a fluid process and as such it was hard to clearly define, but it was a significant finding because how often members of Safe Mountain engage in the activity and how the term “processing” became colloquial in this community. The context and localized meanings behind

processing were unique to Safe Mountain such that it was a new finding for intentional communities.

It is my hope that these findings give researchers more context if they are interested in isolated intentional LGBT communities. Though there are some limitations and great potentials for future research, this study illuminates what we are missing when we ignore the large amount of intentional communities in the United States. This study was a wake-up call that there are some phenomenal occurrences happening amongst individuals who have the courage to pursue life in a commune or alternative community.

#### *Limitations and Areas for Future Research*

There were some limitations to this study that can be improved upon through further research. The biggest limitation was that this research was conducted in winter months in a community that is difficult to reach from a logistics perspective. Also due to harsh weather there was a decline in temporary residents that lived on site at Safe Mountain. More participants would be easier to recruit in the spring and summer months.

While my interviews were in depth and presented rich data, it would be beneficial to interview others to include more perspectives. A larger sampling size for research in intentional communities is not a problem unique to this particular study. In fact, one of the most prominent pieces on an intentional community was published with only eight participants who lived in an ecovillage (Cunningham, 2014).

Gaining access to communes or intentional communities can be difficult as most are closed. Furthermore, even the open intentional communities only give information about the community's location through word of mouth within specific networks of people. Each of my participants only found out about Safe Mountain because they had either befriended someone

who was involved in the Safe Mountain community or they had lived in a similar intentional community context. Researchers wanting to explore intentional communities should intend on taking an entirely ethnographic approach, as the more the researcher can assimilate in these types of communities the more comfortable residents of the community feel to disclose information. I was fortunate to have such open participants willing to share deeply personal experiences of their time at Safe Mountain, but other members might not feel comfortable speaking to outsiders.

### **Conclusion**

By understanding the factors that draw people to intentional communities and how consensus operates in these contexts, my hope is that researchers can be more cognizant of alternative lifestyles. Spending time at Safe Mountain and getting to know the brave men and women who abandoned social conventions for a better life was a truly transformative experience. I am so grateful for communities like Safe Mountain that challenge my subscription to social norms, force me to answer hard questions, and make me more appreciative of my life through the process.

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