

COLLABORATIVE ANARCHY:
CONSENSUS-BASED DECISION MAKING IN AN LGBTQ COMMUNITY

Abstract

This case study examined consensus-based decision making in a modern LGBTQ commune that had both anarchist and Wiccan influences. Consensus-based decision making in this community resulted in inclusivity and equal power distribution for members, but the process also presented challenges. A primary challenge to the consensus-based decision model was that participants found it difficult to express dissent. Another challenge was that the community's commitment to anarchism and lack of formal leadership made it impossible to enforce communal decisions. The lack of enforcement resulted in consequences that ranged from trivial inconveniences to serious life threatening situations. Implications and future directions for consensus-based decision making are discussed.

Introduction

Consensus-based decision models are known to encourage participation from all members of an organization. Many advocates of organizational democracy see consensus as a tool to ensure a more equitable distribution of power and a way to include all voices in collective decision making (Cheney, 1995). Since the focus of consensus-based decision making is inclusion and shared power, it is often characterized as a viable alternative to the bureaucratic hierarchical systems that guide most contemporary organizations (Cheney, 1995). Researchers have often observed consensus in egalitarian organizations and have seen the positive impact it has made for individual members and organizations as a whole (Ashcraft, 2001; Hoffman; 2002). But while consensus has been observed in nonprofit and religious organizations, there have not been many examples of consensus models in alternative communities such as exclusively queer communes.

Communes have not been a trend in research since the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, when 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). It has been speculated that communes have been ignored because many believe that diseases like AIDS and the changing attitudes of mainstream society had eradicated intentional communities altogether (Rubin, 2001). But despite the lack of research on communes, intentional communities still exist. The structure, culture, and decision making practices of these modern

communes can give insight on both the benefits and challenges of consensus-based decision making.

Literature Review

Much of the research on intentional communities describe how these communities impact their neighbors or the environment, but few studies examine the structure of these communities or how collective decisions are made (Smith, 2008; Liftin, 2014). One exception is Cunningham's (2014) research that explored an ecovillage in Ireland that utilized consensus-based models to make decisions for the community. Cunningham explained that, "The consensus model is built upon the provisions of full access, participation and trust" (p. 237). Stohl and Cheney (2001) explained that consensus models can serve as an ideal tool for orchestrating an organizational democracy. Consensus is instrumental because it requires the participation of each member in decision making. In consensus it does not matter if there is a majority in favor of a decision, if just one member dissents a decision cannot be passed. Because consensus is difficult, Cunningham observed that this model can influence individuals to nominally support collective decisions instead of expressing dissent. When talking about limitations of his study, Cunningham urged for more research to see if the experiences of his participants could be transferable to similar communities.

Another study that focused on consensus-based decision making in a shared community is Renz's (2006) study of a cohousing environment. Renz explained how consensus is often implemented in environments that value collaborative problem solving. While the participants in the study valued consensus, they found that pragmatic elements like time, deadlines, and urgency of issues made consensus challenging (Renz, 2006). The communities featured in Renz's and

Cunningham's (2014) studies both had a defined process and formal committees to facilitate the consensus-based model of decision making.

While Renz (2006) and Cunningham (2014) studied communities that operated with consensus-based decision making using formal processes guided by committees, other researchers have focused on organizations characterized by flatter hierarchies and egalitarian principles. Ashcraft (2001) examined consensus-based decision making as a characteristic of a feminist bureaucratic hybrid organization she studied. In the nonprofit organization featured in Ashcraft's case study, members participated in decision making meetings with program directors who served a group facilitator role. Like the ecovillage that Cunningham (2014) studied, Ashcraft also noticed that getting true consensus and participation from individuals was compromised for the sake of efficiency and fear of expressing dissent. While the participants in Ashcraft's study tried to refrain from typical bureaucratic conventions of hierarchical leadership structures, Ashcraft did identify formal leaders who exercised decision making power in the feminist egalitarian bureaucratic organization. Like Ashcraft, Hoffman (2002) also studied decision making in a feminist egalitarian context. Hoffman examined organizational democracy for Benedictine nuns. Just as some participants in Ashcraft's study were aggravated by the inefficiency of shared decision making, Hoffman came across nuns who did not enjoy the level of participation required to make group decisions.

It is clear from past research that examples of consensus-based decision making are rare and that case studies on modern day intentional communities are even rarer. This study filled both gaps with the exploration of a queer intentional community that practiced consensus-based decision making. The purpose of this study was to explore how participants understand the benefits and challenges of consensus-based decision making in their intentional LGBTQ

alternative community. Data was collected through observation and semi structured interviews with members of the Safe Mountain community.

Setting of the Study

Safe Mountain is an LGBTQ intentional community in the Southeastern United States. The history of the community can be traced back to the early 1970s when, much like the Transcendentalist movement, the founders of the community left urban environments to make a home in nature. The founders consisted of a small group of men and women who were dissatisfied with the restrictions of heteronormative culture and wanted to create a space where LGBTQ individuals could safely explore their identities. 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). Long 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. In addition to providing a space that embraced diversity and eradicated aspects of herteronormative culture, members of the community also valued a Wiccan heritage and a commitment to anarchist principles.

Within the 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 much huts but still participated in communal events. The community as a whole had a fluctuating population but it usually consisted of thirty permanent residents and neighbors year round. At any given time throughout the year there could

be any number of temporary visitors that lived on the grounds. The number of temporary visitors would spike during biannual festivals that the community called “gatherings.”

The residency process was so long and intensive that residency status was reserved for individuals who 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 had 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 consensus on whether to allow the individual to be a part of the community as a permanent resident. The community did not have a standard process for residency decisions but the individuals were usually evaluated on whether or not they make a positive impact on the community.

There are some obvious disadvantages to becoming a resident at Safe Mountain including lack of jobs in the local area, an unequal distribution of labor in the community, and conflict between residents. But despite the disadvantages of living in the Safe Mountain community, members of the community described a plethora of benefits that made the community a special place including the: positive intentions of others, unparalleled diversity, strong feelings of belongingness and acceptance, opportunities to learn new things, and a consensus-based decision making model as the reasons to join and remain in the community.

The first benefit for members of Safe Mountain was the positive intentions of each community member. The positive intentions united the residents of Safe Mountain in powerful ways. The intention of residents and visitors of 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.

Another core benefit of Safe Mountain was its commitment to diversity and acceptance. Members felt that their identity or practices would be viewed harshly by the outside world. Safe Mountain provided a sexual sanctuary where residents and visitors could identify as they wished without judgment. This benefit 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.

Further than mere tolerance, Safe Mountain residents were committed to fully celebrating diversity. The incredible diversity of the community was reflected in the eclectic postmodern design of the sacred maypole which was showcased in the middle of the community. 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, adorned with simple ribbons and put into the ground after ceremonial incantations and blessings. 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.

It was important to recognize that Safe Mountain was not only a place for those in good health, the residents of the Safe Mountain community also made an incredible humanitarian impact by providing a place of healing and restoration for members. There were residents of Safe Mountain who were suffering from AIDS, physical disabilities, recovering from drug addiction,

or various mental disorders. The men and women of Safe Mountain focused on caring for the sick and providing a place where people could work towards recovery.

Another core benefit for members of Safe Mountain was the opportunity to express creativity and learn. Throughout the year there were guest speakers, workshops, and intercultural events. Some workshops that had been popular over the last few years at Safe Mountain included lessons on Wiccan heritage, queer identity, music, yoga, fermentation, farming, dancing, and meditation. This benefit 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.

Just as Safe Mountain was a place for residents to learn, it was also a site for them to teach visitors who ventured into the community. The community hosted biannual events called "gatherings." When a gathering took place, the Safe Mountain community opened itself to hundreds of visitors who explored the grounds and practiced communal living values. The gathering required no upfront costs or registration fees. Instead the community asked for visitor donations to help offset the cost of the event (food, cleanup, any necessary renovations) and sold many artisan products. Often the gathering resulted in a profit for the Safe Mountain community and the money was put aside into a communal fund. This fund was managed by two elders of the community that provided financial updates at the weekly family meeting.

Safe Mountain members were dependent on one another for basic survival and financial needs. Funds were usually apportioned to communal needs like soap for the facilities or food that could not be grown in community gardens. However, if a resident was in desperate need of financial help for needs like health care or travel, it was 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 showed that not one individual could have greater access to community resources over others.

Lastly, Safe Mountain operated on consensus-based decision making. This type of decision making required patience, participation, and the ability to consider needs for the group as a whole. The consensus-based model of decision making complemented the community's anarchist principles that prevented the community from developing any formal leaders or hierarchical structure. So 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 (Cunningham, 2014; Ashcraft, 2001). This all queer community made decisions with consensus-based decision making during weekly sessions called "family meetings" which were coordinated by the entire resident population of the community. Some intentional communities will close off decision making to permanent residents, but Safe Mountain differed in that it allowed non-residents or former residents to contribute in the decision making process.

In addition to permanent residents, visitors of the community, former residents, people who were temporarily living on the grounds, and members of the community who lived nearby all had a voice in matters of consensus. It was clear that the residents of Safe Mountain understood that there were others who were invested in the community and affected by the

decisions made over resources. As a result the residents of Safe Mountain were open to other voices contributing in the consensus model. This case study examines member perceptions of the characteristics and challenges of consensus-based decision model used by the community.

Methods and Data Analysis

As I had never previously been to a place like Safe Mountain and did not previously 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). In addition to using techniques of naturalistic inquiry, semi structured interviews with three members of the community were used to keep concepts open ended (Whyte, 1982). 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 and an analysis of consensus based decision making.

Sampling and Data Collection

Each participant in this study was a single Caucasian male who identified as queer, homosexual, bisexual, or pansexual. Each participant also 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 length of time participants lived at Safe Mountain ranged from 90 days to 7 years. Unlike most intentional communities that are completely closed to outsiders, Safe Mountain was a completely open intentional community. The openness of the community meant 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).

Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview started (Creswell, 1998). In each semi structured interview I operated with a basic interview protocol but often deviated from the guide as needed (Whyte, 1982). In each interview the participant was given time to present information that had not been discussed, as well as my contact information in case they wanted to add or change anything later. Interviews were recorded and transcribed word for word to assist with theme analysis (Creswell, 1998).

While on the grounds of Safe Mountain, I was able to conduct an artifact analysis and observe a resident meeting (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The meeting I observed helped me gain perspective on how consensus-based decision making was practiced. In addition to observing a meeting, I analyzed an artifact 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.

Verification

Three verification methods 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 consensus-based decision making, I also observed a family meeting utilizing consensus for decisions 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). An example of a significant outlier opinion in this study is

when one participant insisted that there were no community leaders while others agreed that certain people led the community. These forceful opinions confirmed the context and specifics 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 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.

Participants

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 is 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.

Findings

When exploring the participants’ view of consensus at Safe Mountain, the mechanics of Safe Mountain decision making, the challenge of dissent, and the difficulty of enforcing community decisions emerged as prominent themes. Throughout the findings section you will see direct quotations from participants, the number in parentheses next to the participant’s name corresponds to the page in the interview transcript where the quote is found.

It is challenging to express dissent. In the first emergent theme, it became clear that expressing dissent was challenging at Safe Mountain. While nonresidents were welcomed to contribute their perspectives and give voice during consensus, expressing dissent was described as difficult by the participants. Kiki, who had previously explained how non residents have a voice in consensus continued to say, “If they [nonresidents] are going to dissent to something and say, ‘No I block this!’ And they don’t live there, that might not be, you know considered consensus.” (Kiki: 6) This was particularly strong language that if a nonresident expressed dissent their voice might not be considered in the consensus-based decision process. It seems that

nonresidents were valued when expressing agreement with residents but that dissent from a nonresident might not be considered legitimate.

Another participant, Major, explained his feelings on expressing dissent in family meetings. Major was considered a temporary resident who lived at Safe Mountain for 30-60 day periods sporadically throughout the year. Major described how he was not officially a resident of the community but felt valued by the community. When asked about expressing dissent in a family meeting Major stated, "I would not dare contribute my voice unless I felt it was really important for people to hear this" (Major: 60). Major explained that he would not feel comfortable expressing dissent in a family meeting because he would not want to stop decisions that might benefit permanent residents in the community.

When I observed a family meeting I was surprised with how long it took to make decisions through consensus. A simple agenda resulted in a three hour meeting that seemed to frustrate some members. There were many times when a resident would contribute and I observed other members rolling their eyes or sighing in frustration. These observations connected with the observation of the participant, JB, who was fairly new to the community. JB stated, that the community had put a focus on "really getting consensus." (JB: 46). This perspective indicated that there was a point of contention on consensus and whether the community as a whole was truly participating or if some opinions were marginalized. While residents were committed to the consensus-based decision model, there seemed to be some problems with keeping everyone engaged throughout family meetings.

Decisions deliberately led to happen outside consensus. Along with being a community that made decisions using a consensus model, Safe Mountain residents also abided by anarchist principles. The anarchist principles actually led some residents to make community decisions

without getting consensus or consulting others. Major explained the decisions that happened outside of the consensus model: “I see also a lot of times things that happen that are deliberately led to happen outside of that scheme so that consensus doesn’t have to- whether just for practical reasons, like we don’t have time to get consensus” (Major: 70). For the sake of efficiency, some decisions were not brought into consensus. In this specific example, Major explained a choice that a resident made to spend twenty dollars to buy gravel for a community event. Even though the resident was using community finances for the purchase, it was not brought to consensus.

Kiki also echoed Major’s observation that some decisions were led to occur outside of the consensus model. Kiki said, “You know, asking for it to happen might be much much harder than actually making it happen yourself” (Kiki: 7). The anarchist principles that spurred individuals to action presented conflicts to the transparent consensus decision making that served the community. Some of the tension between the concepts came from different opinions over what community decisions were appropriate to be made by an individual and which decisions should have been made by the entire community. Even the spur of the moment decision to spend community money on gravel angered other residents of the community.

Hidden leadership. The anarchist principles of Safe Mountain guided the community decision that there would be no formal leadership or hierarchy. When asked if leaders might naturally emerge in the community without formal recognition or election process, Kiki expressed a forceful opinion: “The whole purpose of it being consensus and an anarchist-based community and I would have to say truthfully and absolutely not” (Kiki: 30). While Kiki was forceful in asserting that there was no one who resembled a leader at Safe Mountain, other participants had a different perspective.

Major explained the types of leaders he sees at Safe Mountain, “It’s a type of leadership where they’re not out getting supporters or trying to align allies or anything. I think that it appropriately, beautifully manifests out of everyone’s experience with one another.” (Major: 67). In Major’s experience, he found that he possessed similar qualities to the natural leaders of Safe Mountain. Major was afraid that if he became a permanent resident of Safe Mountain that he would emerge as a hidden leader. Major’s fear of leading Safe Mountain was so paramount, that it was cited as one of the reasons that kept him from living as a permanent resident in the community. In regards to this tension Major explained:

This is part of the reason I’m nervous to get so involved in the community. I feel like I’m the kind of person who has these skills... I don’t know if I want to be someone who is looked as the person who’s always going to have the best idea or best way to resolve a situation. I’d rather kick back and just try not to create any situations that need resolution (Major: 68).

This contribution showed that the leaders of Safe Mountain were often the individuals who were well respected, had great ideas, were natural peacemakers, and were able to lead without criticism because they received no formal recognition. Major also demonstrated the significant responsibility that these hidden informal leaders had for the community, even though they were not recognized for their leadership efforts.

JB also noticed that there were situations where leadership roles could change. JB said, “There isn’t any designed hierarchy, that some of those roles can change and that it shifts-who has power or how power is shared. What is being heard and who is being heard” (JB: 49). To JB, the leaders of the community changed depending on the situation- this was connected to how

competent an individual was in a given problem area. In this way, power was rotated between the people of Safe Mountain in ways that served the needs of the community.

It's impossible to enforce community decisions. There are times when the anarchist values of the community clashed with the decisions made in family meetings. Kiki described a time when one of the members of the community presented a threat to the safety of others. This particular member, Sister Sarah, was well known for founding a popular LGBTQ nonprofit organization that helped advance LGBTQ causes around the globe, especially caring for those who suffered from AIDS. Sister Sarah had also helped raise money for construction projects around Safe Mountain for residents and visitors of the community. While Sister Sarah had done much good for the community, she often broke resident guidelines.

Sister Sarah was a hoarder and occupied two homes for herself. Residents of Safe Mountain were required to share each home with at least one other member of the community. Kiki described one particular occasion where the community was hosting hundreds of visitors and everyone was holding hands in a circle around the community, it was then that Sister Sarah decided to drive her truck through a group of visitors almost hitting and killing them. After these grievances, Kiki said, "They [Community as a whole] eventually asked Sister Sarah to leave, but she didn't leave. She's still there" (Kiki: 37). While the community might come to decisions by consensus, its anarchist principles kept them from enforcing decisions- even against threats to the community.

There were trivial situations where the anarchist values of the community kept communal decisions from being enforced. Major explained that during the gatherings there was often conflict over what type of music should be played throughout the festival. Some journeyed to the gathering to connect with nature. These visitors tended to appreciate more simple and

acoustic music that harmonized with the natural landscape. Other visitors wanted to party and listen to electronic music throughout the week. Before Safe Mountain's last gathering, the community reached a decision that allowed for both electronic music and acoustic music at different times throughout the week. But because the anarchist values of Safe Mountain encouraged individuals to do whatever they would like, the music agreement was not communicated or enforced during the festival. Major described how he felt during the festival: "What ended up happening was there were many nights where music went all night and I laid in my tent thinking...they're negatively impacting other people that I care about" (Major: 78). From huge safety risks to disturbances during festivals, it was clear that Safe Mountain's commitment to anarchism kept the community from enforcing decisions made in consensus. These descriptions questioned the collective decision making power in the Safe Mountain community-especially when the community was unlikely or simply unable to enforce the decisions they had made.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine consensus processes in an LGBTQ intentional community that operated on both Wiccan and anarchist principles. The research illuminated the pragmatics of managing the Safe Mountain consensus-based decision making process. Due to the substantial lack of research on life in intentional communities, many of these findings are significant to understanding how participants actually experienced daily participation in a queer alternative community.

Two sets of themes on managing consensus-based decision making at Safe Mountain emerged through data analysis. The first grouping of themes focused on how Safe Mountain invited everyone to participate in consensus but that some members found it difficult to express

dissent. The other subset of themes addressed that Safe Mountain practiced consensus-based decision making, but had no authority to enforce group decisions.

The Conceptual Freedom to Contribute

Past research has confirmed that individuals have often found it hard to express dissent in the consensus-based decision making process (Cunningham, 2014). In consensus environments individuals who express dissent could be referred to as “blockers” (Renz, 2006). According to Renz (2006), blockers could prevent a collective decision from being made. This finding confirmed past research on the difficulty in expressing dissent in consensus-based decision processes. Emergent themes from this study on the topic of dissent indicated that when individuals tried to block a group decision, they might be excluded from the group altogether.

All the participants agreed that Safe Mountain operated off of a consensus model where everyone had a voice regardless of their residency status (whether the individual was a permanent resident, a temporary resident, or a visitor). But one participant, who had vast experience in the community, explained that if someone did not have permanent residency status and tried to block a decision that their voice would not be considered in consensus. This finding indicated that there was tension between Safe Mountain’s claims about its approach to consensus giving everyone an equal voice and dissent from temporary residents or visitors. This finding echoed Ashcraft’s (2001) research that in an egalitarian context that practiced consensus not all voices are given equal weight. At Safe Mountain temporary residents and visitors were more than welcome to agree with permanent residents, but blocking a motion or expressing dissent from the group might exclude them from the decision making altogether.

Consensus without Authority

Previous research on cohabitations and ecovillages dealt with communities that were certainly more egalitarian but still had formal committees or facilitators to guide collective decision making (Cunningham, 2014; Renz, 2006). Unlike communities explored in past research, this study on Safe Mountain presented some new findings given that it was a community that operated on anarchist principles and had no formal leaders, committees, or facilitators whatsoever. Furthermore anarchist principles could lead members to make decisions outside of consensus.

Ashcraft's (2001) study on a nonprofit feminist bureaucracy hybrid organization indicated that sometimes entire group decision making was not possible due to the urgency of time sensitive issues and the consensus model was either abandoned or short circuited. Hoffman's (2002) study on organizational democracy in a feminist context did not give examples of decisions made without the group, but it did detail participants who were frustrated with the great length of time involved in decision making. At Safe Mountain, participants also cited frustration on how long consensus-based decision making took and that there were no options to expedite the process. This finding further supported the concept that individuals will bypass consensus-based decision making altogether when faced with urgency or time sensitive issues, regardless of whether they value consensus and collaborative decision making. Safe Mountain provided a unique example of this phenomenon as the anarchist values of the community could be cited by an individual to explain why the group was not consulted in decision making, even if the main factor that led the individual outside of consensus was just a lack of time.

The anarchist principles of Safe Mountain meant that formal leadership was impossible. But while the community was adverse to formal leaders or leadership positions, some

participants explained that there were individuals who resembled leaders. These informal leaders or hidden sources of leadership naturally rose out of mutual respect and admiration from the entire community. The finding that informal or hidden leadership could blossom in environments that were adverse to leadership positions or authority figures was a new finding for intentional communities that value anarchist principles.

In addition to the anarchist principles preventing formal leadership, these values also prohibited the members of Safe Mountain from enforcing any decisions made in consensus. Past research on intentional communities often explained that once a decision was made in consensus that it was upheld by the community and put into practice (Cunningham, 2014; Renz, 2006). In Safe Mountain, if an individual disagreed with a decision there was no way for the community to enforce the decision. The clearest example of this was when the community asked a member to leave because she dissented from community standards of residency and presented a threat to the safety of others. Regardless of the decision made, the individual asked to leave refused and still lived on the property. The inability to enforce decisions is a special consideration for intentional communities that operate with consensus-based decision making.

It is my hope that these findings give researchers more context if they are interested in consensus-based decision making, intentional communities, or isolated LGBTQ 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. There are 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 logistically hard to reach. 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 that operated on consensus-based decision making 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.

In most disciplines there has been a focus on studying consensus-based decision making in a vocational context, but little research has been done on communities that use consensus. In addition to the lack of research available on intentional communities, there is not any substantial

research on communities that operate on anarchist ideologies or how those ideologies guide community decisions. Researchers should continue to examine intentional communities to learn more about alternative lifestyles for individuals and collective groups.

Conclusion

Safe Mountain is a unique community in that it is a product of the intersectionality between LGBTQ, anarchist, and Wiccan worldviews. It can be easy to overlook the practical applications that Safe Mountain offered because it presented a lifestyle so different than lifestyles offered by mainstream culture. As more and more people advocate for higher organizational participation and more equitable distributions of power in the workplace, Safe Mountain offered some prescriptions for groups interested in consensus-based decision models.

When Safe Mountain instituted consensus-based decision making, there seemed to be an underlying assumption that the majority of decisions would require participation from every member in the community. But it was evident that some decisions were only easily understood by a select few. For instance, the family meeting I observed involved a two hour conversation on whether or not to move the stove in the kitchen for building maintenance reasons. It became clear in the conversation that many members did not understand the situation enough to offer input. In other decisions, members of Safe Mountain would express frustration at the time involved in consensus and often felt relief when they could cite anarchist principles and make decisions outside of the group. As a result of these frustrations, Safe Mountain had a hard time keeping people engaged during the decision making process.

Based on the challenges experienced in Safe Mountain with consensus, organizations wanting to implement this process should not consider it as an “all or nothing” decision model. Cheney (1995) proposed that when complex decisions are being made in a consensus based

context that some members should be granted a stronger voice based on their level of expertise on the subject. Decisions that are not relevant to most community members and decisions that involve advanced understanding or expertise seem inappropriate in the consensus model. It would be helpful for organizations to negotiate which types of decisions are beneficial for the consensus model as to not waste members' time or interest. The decisions that are made outside of consensus can be reviewed by members to increase accountability. If a community is uncomfortable with making distinctions between decisions that can be made inside or outside consensus then it must consider ways of expediting the consensus-based process when faced with time sensitive pressures.

Another practical implication from Safe Mountain involves the community's inability to enforce decisions. This issue is relevant as organizations are moving towards flatter structures with more equal distributions of power. While Safe Mountain tried to create a peaceful and harmonious community, there were some individuals who threatened the safety of others. There were also times when the Safe Mountain community felt that they had come to a great solution but that solution was unable to be instituted. Organizations or communities that seek to rid themselves of hierarchal distributions of power or abolish leadership should consider how they intend on protecting their community and enforcing group decisions. In Safe Mountain, a community without formal structures or rules, it was easy to see how chaos might ensue. Organizations or communities might think a specified code of conduct or a culture of core values can preserve an organization, but they should be cautioned to consider the communal consequences if rules are broken by individuals.

By understanding the benefits and challenges, paradoxes and tensions of consensus-based decision models in intentional communities, my hope is that researchers can be more cognizant

of alternative lifestyles and learn from their approaches to organizing. 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.

References

- Ashcraft, K.L. (2001). Organized dissonance: Feminist bureaucracy as hybrid form. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(6), 1301-1322.
- Baxter, L.A. & Babbie, E. (2003). *The Basics on Communication Research*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Bennett, J. (1975). Communes and communitarianism. *Theory and Society*, 2 (1), 63-94.
- Cheney, G. (1995). Democracy in the workplace: Theory and practice from the perspective of communication. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 23, 167-200.
- Creswell, J.W. (1998). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J.W. & Miller, D.L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *The Ohio State Journal*, 39(3), 124-130.
- Cunningham, P.A. (2014). Exploring the efficacy of consensus-based decision-making: A pilot study of the Cloughjordan Ecovillage Ireland. *International Journal of Housing Markets and Analysis*, 7 (2), 233-253.

- Hoffman, M. (2002). Do all things with counsel: Benedictine woman and organizational democracy. *Communication Studies*, 53 (7), 203-218.
- Lincoln Y.S. & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Lindlof, T.R. & Taylor, B.C. (2011). *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Litfin, K. T. (2014). Ecovillages: Lessons for Sustainable Community. *Environment*, 57 (2), 38-40.
- Renz, M.A. (2006). Paving consensus: Enacting, challenging, and revision the consensus process in a cohousing community. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 34 (2), 163-190.
- Rubin, R. (2001). Alternative lifestyles revisited, or whatever happened to swingers, group marriages, and communes? *Journal of Family Issues*, 22 (6), 711-726.
- Seaton, C.T. (2014). *Hippie Homesteaders: Arts, Crafts, Music and Living on the Land in West Virginia*. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press.
- Smith, K. (2008). "You've been wonderful neighbors": Key factors in the successful integration of a Wiccan coven into a suburban community in the Southeastern United States. *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 12 (1), 103-115.
- Smith, L. and Shin, R. (2015) Negotiating the intersection of racial oppression and heteronormativity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 62 (11), 1459-1484.
- Stohl, C. & Cheney, G. (2001). Participatory processes/paradoxical practices. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 14,349-407.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research. Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Tashakkori, A. & Teddlie, C (2003). *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioral Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Whyte, W.F. (1982). Interviewing in field research. In R. Burgess (Ed.), *Field research: A sourcebook and field manual*. London: George, Allen, & Unwin.