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"We Try to Create the World That We Want"

Intentional Communities Forging Livable Lives in St. Louis

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The university-wide Livable Lives Initiative investigates what social conditions and policy supports can make life with a low or moderate income stable, secure, satisfying, and successful. The aim is to build a large body of work that informs local programs as well as state and federal policies in economic security, employment, public health, education, housing, and other key areas.

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"We Try to Create the World That We Want": Intentional Communities Forging Livable Lives in St. Louis

This paper analyzes ethnographic research conducted in five intentional communities in the St. Louis region. Intentional communities have long been formed and entered into by people seeking to create more ideal, more livable lives. Our research focused on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the members of the five communities, the motivations of members for joining, and the benefits and shortcomings they experience. In reporting these findings we summarize common themes that help us to better understand why people join intentional communities, how those communities work, and the values and goals that underpin conceptions of quality of life there. We also draw from our data a set of recommendations related to policy obstacles and opportunities that are present in municipalities like St. Louis that facilitate or obstruct the formation of intentional communities and their endeavors to create more livable lives.

Key words: intentional communities, communal living, sustainability, social capital

Introduction

A troubling irony of our times is that economic growth often parallels significant social, health, and environmental problems. The volume of consumer surpluses in the United States expanded in the past few decades, but there was no correlation to increased levels of happiness, feelings of security, or experiences of health and well-being (Storper 2000). In fact, there are diminished levels of social capital in communities (Putnam 2000; Olds and Schwartz 2009), expanded disparities in many areas of social epidemiology (Murray et al. 2004), and decreased physical and mental well-being (Kasser 2002). Ballooned consumption patterns contribute to environmental degradation that causes health problems and may threaten future economic stability (IPCC 2007; Robbins 2002). Measured as a holistic concept linking socioeconomic stability and resiliency and psychosocial and physical health, the well-being of individuals and populations has worsened in the United States.

Anthropological research often reflects a desire to understand human existence in this holistic way. Rather than looking to crude metrics of development to assess the quality of life in communities, anthropologists prefer to measure and balance multiple indicators, perspectives, and values and use ethnographic engagement with communities to contextualize experiences and meanings of the good life. Consider the deep anthropological tradition of presenting small-scale tribal societies as case studies of sustainable cultures characterized by integrated forms of social, economic, and political organization that promote collective well-being and stability (Marcus and Fischer 1986, Maybury-Lewis 1992). Anthropological livelihoods research reveals the multiple strategies and resources people utilize to make their lives livable (Chambers 1997; Gowdy and Hubacek 2000) and anthropologists have a long history of combining subjective and objective measures of well-being and applying them to the amelioration of social problems (Smith and Clay 2010).

It seems only natural that anthropological research in intentional communities, where people come together to create small-scale living and working arrangements, can contribute to this tradition of cultural critique by clarifying those aspects of contemporary society that voluntary expatriates deem unlivable and illuminating their attempts to construct viable alternatives. Our project used ethnographic methods to study five intentional communities in the St. Louis metropolitan area and the surrounding region. These are communities where groups of people have, of their own accord, taken up the challenge of creating new and different lives for themselves and their neighbors by taking some distance from mainstream society and focusing on living together in pursuit of shared values or goals. We asked who joins these communities, why they join them, and what they believe about the roles of intentional living and relevant public policies in individual and community stability and well-being.

This research presented an opportunity to explore how lives and livelihoods improve through processes enacted at the grassroots level and through the building of community bonds. We found people engaged in inclusive, democratic community-building projects and outreach with neighbors from different backgrounds. This focus on grassroots intentional community building reveals some aspects of the range of social existence that take shape between the forms of governmentality and social control that mold patterns of life in the society at large. In the communities we studied there was little influence from mass media or formal institutions, and the members preferred it this way. We found people taking increasing control of their lives and livelihoods by explicitly attempting to transcend the dominant discourses, policies, and forms of rationality that purportedly point the way to the good life for the masses but often do not actually lead there. In the process, these people often confront fundamental questions about who they are and what their position is relative to the larger society and the forms of rationality that govern and order it.

Intentional Communities: Livable Lives from Utopian Dreaming to Everyday Practice

Intentional community building is a dissenting tradition that has been traced back thousands of years, especially in Western cultural contexts (Kanter 1972; Metcalf 2004). Intentional communities have been continuously present in the U.S., although their numbers have surged at different times, perhaps most notably in the popular consciousness, as part of the countercultural movements during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Metcalf 2004; Miller 1998; Oved 1988). One study (Berry 1992) correlates surges in intentional community building with crises in the U.S. economy and the associated social unease that accompanies them, a theme to which we return later. Less well known is the fact that the number of intentional communities has been growing both within the U.S. and globally over the last ten to fifteen years (Lockyer 2007). Increasingly, these communities focus on creating more sustainable livelihoods and building networks of social capital by reconnecting with people and the places they live in.

At the most fundamental level, intentional communities are groups of people who have come together to live cooperatively in pursuit of a shared vision of a better society. More rigorously defined, intentional communities are 1) a deliberate coming together 2) of five or more people not all of whom are related 3) to live in a geographic locality 4) with a common aim to improve their lives and the broader society through conscious social design. These communities 5) involve some degree of economic, social and cultural sharing or cooperation and 6) some degree of separation from the surrounding society (Lockyer 2007; Miller 1999, 2009). Scholars generally distinguish these types of communities from grander, more ill-fated utopian social engineering projects such as state-

based socialism by pointing to the voluntary nature and the small scale of most intentional communities (Lockyer 2007; Scott 1998).

Despite the fact that many of the communities that have come into existence since the early 1990s refer to themselves as "natural laboratories" for "sustainability" or "human well-being" (Dawson 2006), there is a dearth of research aimed at assessing the actual benefits or impacts (social, economic, health and ecological) that arise from intentional community living (for exceptions see Mulder et al. 2006; Gibson and Koontz 1998). Joshua Lockyer has conducted ethnographic research in intentional communities for the last ten years. Among the main findings of this work is that these communities do not fit the stereotypical images of "hippies" or other imagined misfits. While community building endeavors are often experimental in nature, they are not pursued with an escapist or hopelessly romantic mentality nor are they only established in rural contexts. Contemporary intentional communitarians actively seek engagement with the wider world. They seek to serve as models and demonstration centers for a transition to a more just and sustainable society. They seek to learn from their mistakes and shortcomings and offer them as lessons from which others who seek more livable lives might learn. People from a variety of backgrounds find their way to intentional community building as a means of addressing well-thought-out critiques of predominant cultural, social, political, and economic patterns. Even more directly, many people recognize the building of community bonds as an end in itself in that being part of a community constitutes a significant improvement in their lives.

The building of "social capital," or relationships within and between groups and individuals, is a fundamental component of contemporary intentional community building. The higher degree of social capital characteristic of intentional communities and its contribution to a more sustainable society has been documented elsewhere. Mulder et al. (2006) propose that the building of social capital serves as a means to some other goal such as sustainability. We suggest, that while increased social capital may have broader benefits contemporary intentional communitarians also see social capital as an end in itself. An increase in the number and quality of social relationships is a fundamental goal of today's intentional communitarians and is at the heart of their visions of more lives. This is an ethnographic perspective that emerges from our research in and around St. Louis over the past year as well as from longer-term research in these communities. This perspective complements the econometric approach that has been characteristic of other scholarly treatments of social capital and the benefits of contemporary intentional communities.

St. Louis Intentional Communities

In this section we provide brief, introductory overviews of each of the five communities we worked with.

Culver Way intentional community is located in the Central West End neighborhood of St. Louis. Eight people share a large house and yard, cultivate and maintain a large garden on an adjacent lot, and socialize regularly amongst themselves and with neighbors and the broader community. What began in 1998 as an old, rundown, three-story house purchased by a middle-aged couple with an interest in forming a co-housing community has become a cooperative house with plans for community expansion into adjacent lots. People who initially rented spare rooms in the house soon found common interests involving sharing their lives with others, gardening, and social and environmental activism. These common interests formed the foundation for an intentional

community where group cooperation, interaction and support are highly valued. In essence, Culver Way serves as an extended family for a group of individuals engaged in diverse pursuits.

CAMP, the Community Arts and Media Project, was started in 2002 by a group of activists in South Saint Louis who rehabbed a building and incorporated as a nonprofit organization. Now known as the Community Arts and Movement Project, the group seeks to produce public art, provide educational services, and promote healthy living in its neighborhood, which is a low-income, ethnically-diverse part of the city. Current projects include yoga sessions, art programs targeting schoolchildren in the neighborhood, the organization of a community parade and neighborhood festival, and a grant-funded project to help expand access to laptop computers and wireless internet services for this neighborhood. The group also distributes reusable materials to artists and neighborhood residents and works with them to develop creative projects. Because there is no formal membership process, anyone who participates is considered a member, although most core participants live upstairs at the house where there are several rooms available for a minimal monthly rent. For most members, the decision to join CAMP reflected a desire to pursue projects for the benefit of a neighborhood in transition while also putting personal artistic abilities and interests to work.

Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage is different from the other communities in our study in that it is a rural community with a primary focus on creating and demonstrating an ecologically sustainable lifestyle. A self-described "ecovillage" of approximately 45 people located on 280 acres of hills and prairies in rural northeastern Missouri, Dancing Rabbit's mission, as it appears on their website is "To create a society, the size of a small town or village, made up of individuals and communities of various sizes and social structures, which allows and encourages its members to live sustainably. To encourage this sustainable society to grow to have the size and recognition necessary to have an influence on the global community by example, education, and research" (Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage 2010). Dancing Rabbit has one of the highest populations of any intentional community in the St. Louis region with 45 members and plans to become much larger. It is characteristic of the recent surge in the number of ecologically-focused intentional communities nationally, and including it in our study enables us to consider rural as well as urban issues. Dancing Rabbit conducts education and outreach on sustainable living and garners tax-exempt donations and funding. It is also a formal land trust, with the majority of their land designated as a federal conservation area which entitles them to government payments to leave their ground fallow and conserve soil.

Our final two case studies are part of a larger national network of autonomous intentional communities called Catholic Worker hospitality houses. The Catholic Worker movement was started in the 1930s with the aim of "living in accordance with the justice and charity of Jesus Christ" (Catholic Worker 2008). Catholic Worker methods include nonviolence, prayer, hospitality, and voluntary poverty. Volunteers strive to see Christ in everyone. Taking personal responsibility for injustices and individuals in need, as opposed to contributing to an institution or charity, is essential to the movement and particularly manifest in the hospitality houses where social life and work are integrated and where work is not synonymous with paid employment. Members of Catholic Worker hospitality houses do not sign contracts or set end dates for their service, nor do they log their hours. Their aim is not a job in social services, but a life of service. There are approximately 185 Catholic Worker communities in the United States today.

Gloria House (pseudonym) was started in the early 2000s by two experienced Catholic Workers as a hospitality house for recent, non-English speaking immigrants and refugees (referred to as guests) in St. Louis who would otherwise be homeless. The modest community now includes multiple homes on the same city block in North Saint Louis. As the number of community members increased, "active" community member status began to be determined not by residence in the original house but by presence at and participation in weekly meetings and frequent service activities where the needs of guests are reviewed and decisions regarding the community are made. The current community includes the founding couple, four people who live in the main house, as well as a resident of a nearby home. The flexible nature of the community is open and inclusive, without binding members to housing contracts or time commitments. The house is part of an even larger network of liberal, young, mostly white people in North City, an otherwise predominately African-American area of Saint Louis. This network includes various squats (abandoned homes occupied without formal rent, lease, or ownership contracts) and private households, community gardens, and the other Catholic Worker house in our study. People tend to move fluidly between these places, cross-pollinating on projects, changing residences, and engaging each other socially. There are strong anarchist and environmental philosophies in these circles, all of which complement the Catholic Worker beliefs and practices.

Karen House is the other Catholic Worker hospitality house in North St. Louis. It provides services for homeless women and their children. On a minimal budget ($60,000 per year), the house shelters and feeds up to 40 people on any given day. This house was founded in the late 1970s by seven women and is named after its first guest. Community members have usually read about the Catholic Worker movement and been inspired to join or are initially drawn to the relationships in the house and later come to appreciate the core beliefs and values. Originally built to be a convent, the house itself is owned as a property trust by all community members. The house includes public space, a community room, an office, laundry and kitchen facilities, and all of the bedrooms and bathrooms for community members and guests. These groups are segregated insofar as the members live on the third floor, and only they are permitted access to that level. The functioning of the community is well established. Community members take turns "taking house," which consists of answering incoming calls, welcoming visitors and guests, and handling anything else that might arise with the guests in the house. They are all responsible for doing chores, making sure guests have their needs met (each guest has a community member contact who is primarily responsible for her needs), and attending meetings.

Research Methods

Our project was undertaken as part of the Livable Lives Initiative at the Center for Social Development at Washington University's Brown School. This initiative aimed to bring together researchers from multiple disciplines to "(1) document conditions that may inhibit or promote the achievement of livable lives, (2) formulate and test innovations, (3) inform policies and practices that may lead to more livable lives, and (4) study impacts of these policies and practices" (Center for Social Development 2009). Recognizing that intentional communities are inherently formed in pursuit of more livable lives, we sought to work with them to identify what they believe makes life livable and what policy obstacles and opportunities they encounter in pursuing their goals.

As part of the project design, and to link research and teaching, we integrated undergraduate student participation in data collection and analysis. Five students were involved in all stages of research

following the initial project conceptualization. In spring 2010, we led an ethnographic research practicum course in the Department of Anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis, which allowed the students to gain an understanding of a range of ethnographic methods and methodological issues, including research design and research ethics. After initial collective field visits to all of the communities, each student selected a community in which to conduct ethnographic case study research throughout the semester.

In addition to participant-observation, each student administered a questionnaire and conducted semi-structured interviews with community members (Bernard 2006). The questionnaire obtained data on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the community members, basic information about the community, and perceptions about community living. The interviews provided subjective, qualitative data on why members chose to join the particular community, the perceived benefits or shortcomings in comparison with previous living arrangements, and existing policy obstacles and opportunities pertaining to intentional living. The interviews were structured around a set of standard probes to garner information in these areas but were flexible enough to allow interviews to follow the lead of the research subject and cover unanticipated but relevant issues.

At the end of the semester, each student submitted structured case study reports along with interview transcripts and completed questionnaires. Case study reports were revised and submitted to community members for review and comment. This report represents a synthesis and cross-case analysis of these revised case study reports complemented by information from existing literature on intentional communities and from Lockyer's current and previous research.

Due to variations in the size of the communities, some students were able to collect data from a much larger proportion of community members than others. This is particularly true with regard to Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage where the student researcher interviewed 7 and collected questionnaires from 14 of a total of 45 community members. In all other cases, student researchers were able to interview and collect questionnaires from the majority of community members. Here we treat these data sets as a whole to provide a general picture of the views of intentional community members in the St. Louis region.

Results

Socio-economic & Demographic Characteristics

Our research reveals a relatively homogeneous population in terms of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. The members of these communities are overwhelmingly white, from middle-class backgrounds, with modest to graduate level higher educational attainment. One Catholic Worker referred to herself and her fellow communitarians as "people of privilege" indicating that most had been raised in an environment free from want and enjoyed the privilege of many options in their life paths. Many had deliberately foregone lucrative employment options in favor of these alternative living and working arrangements. Almost all of the members of the communities we studied currently live on a meager income and have nontraditional employment, including perhaps a part-time job and unpaid activist or charity work. Reduced expenses through intentional living combined with, in some cases, accumulated wealth freed them from the need to work regular jobs and to focus instead on engaging their ideals. The data in appendix one

summarizes the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of all five communities collectively, and we include relevant snapshots of this data in the findings detailed below.

Accessibility

Given the general socioeconomic homogeneity, we wanted to determine if these communities were accessible to people of other ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Looking at living expenses within the communities relative to the living expenses in the mainstream society, the communities do appear to be accessible. They are more affordable because of reduced rent, shared overhead costs, and varying degrees of pooled risk and security. Surveys at Culver Way reveal that a few members there are now more able to allocate income towards savings. Similarly, at Dancing Rabbit, living expenses including rent and food are extremely low in comparison with previous living arrangements. One interviewee described the cost of living as "on the border of it almost being a developing country. My rent is $170 and my food is $200 a month." Another interviewee said:

> I think my bills are about $400 a month, and that includes everything. If you live collectively you can keep your taxable income around the poverty line and still live a plenty decent lifestyle. It's only when you need your own car and your own washing machine and on and on that it gets really challenging.

The social context of community living also tends to ameliorate the inequalities that are part of the private living patterns of the broader society. A founding member of Gloria House estimated that it costs $400 per month to house and feed the dozen or so guests who live there. Local grocery stores donate food, members often have food stamps, community members dumpster dive, and the house has access to community gardens. By pooling these public and private resources, the house often realizes an excess due to the abundance of food donations that would otherwise go to waste. Because it is more economical to live in these intentional communities (notwithstanding the role of outside funding and government subsidies in some cases), it appears that they are accessible to anyone of a limited income.

However, there seem to be social and cultural reasons that explain the demographic homogeneity characteristic of these communities. There are the existing networks of young liberal-minded activists that help to structure recruitment and placement in these communities. And there is the common spirit of moving away from privilege into a situation of relative poverty, something which may not be appealing to people who do not come from privileged or wealthy backgrounds. In addition, many current community members have college degrees and skill sets that would allow them to be competitive in the job market should they choose to enter it. The probability of obtaining well-paying employment throughout their lives lessens the impact of their choices now. And although these communities are comprised of welcoming and open-minded individuals, the homogeneity could make them appear or be culturally inaccessible.

An anecdote from Gloria House helps to illustrate these themes. Before starting Gloria House, the founding members spent their first months in St. Louis living as community members in Karen House where one of their activities involved facilitating a kind of halfway house for former guests. Many of the members of this house were single mothers, African-American women who were raised in low-income households with limited access to education and other resources. "We stuck it out for a few years," a founder of Gloria House tells us, "but it always felt to me like a support group for

the women as opposed to a community." She admits that the halfway house lacked the kind of mutualism that, in her view, ought to define community living, perhaps as a result of the stark contrast of backgrounds between her family and the other residents. Similar experiences were reported in the other communities, where people are keenly aware of the potential contradictions of this approach to social transformation. "The poor don't have a responsibility to continue to be poor," a member of Karen House says, insisting that voluntary poverty is certainly not something that they promote for everyone. "I don't ever have to ask a guest to live more simply. My responsibility is giving up my own privilege. It's about converting ourselves and not converting them."

Similarly, some members of CAMP report a degree of discomfort with the group's relative homogeneity and privilege when it comes to race and class background. They claim to be aware of the tension of "trying to be the opposite of white gentrification while still being wealthy art kids in the city." The extent to which this is possible remains a sore spot in the neighborhood, where there is admittedly skepticism about the art collective and its aims. This is partly why CAMP focuses on youth programs and outreach for underprivileged neighborhood children as a potential means of boosting reception among the adult members of the neighborhood.

In summary, our analysis reveals that in theory these communities are accessible to people of low incomes and diverse backgrounds, but this may not be realized in practice. Monthly expenses in these communities tended to be low, and this was based on a number of factors, including most prominently shared property ownership, rent, and/or utilities, reduced personal space, reduced use of non-essential services such as cable television, the choice to live in voluntary poverty, and, in two cases, residence in buildings that were either self-built from relatively cheap materials (Dancing Rabbit) or occupied without ownership or leasehold (Gloria House). Reduced expenses and other nontraditional forms of subsistence and livelihood enabled community members to either save money or devote their time and energy to activism, service, or other pursuits of passion. In addition a number of community members, while characterized by currently low incomes, had the option of falling back on a trust fund or other source of financial security. These communities tended to be attractive to and populated by people from privileged backgrounds.

In addition, many people base community building and the relationships that inhere in it on shared life experiences. These groups of largely white, privileged community members may not be an appealing place for people of vastly different backgrounds, values, and life experiences to establish a life and livelihood. Although these communities may be comprised of welcoming and open-minded individuals, and although living in such a community carries the benefit of lower basic living expenses, the relative social homogeneity could make the community appear culturally inaccessible.

Thus while a low-income individual or family may find that they could more easily meet their expenses in the context of an intentional community where expenses are shared it may be unlikely that they would choose to live in such a community because they would not share common experiences, values, or demographic or socio-economic characteristics with existing community members and because they may perceive the risks of making such a choice to be too high. However, this does not necessarily mean that such forms of intentional community living are not applicable to people of lower incomes or underprivileged backgrounds. Indeed, empowering people of such demographics to organize intentional community living arrangements of their own may be a powerful way to reverse longstanding structural conditions that lead to inequality in the first place.

Livable Lives: The Benefits of Intentional Community Living

The people in our study cited a wide range of ways in which intentional community living made their lives more livable. While a few members of the communities were initially seeking a more affordable life, their decisions to stay within the communities were often motivated by nonmonetary considerations. Many were seeking an alternative to the mainstream society where isolation, alienation, and unhealthy, unsustainable lifestyles predominate. In these intentional communities they found a way out of the daily grind and go-go culture of capitalism. They also found increased camaraderie and a supportive environment in which to pursue less socially alienating and ecologically damaging lifestyles. These communities enabled people to spend less time simply meeting their expenses and more time living out their social and moral values. At a most basic level, all of the participants in our research sought out community living because it aligned with their vision of a better world where daily practice involves satisfying and fulfilling social relationships. In the populations we studied, these were the core values that define what comprises a "livable" life.

A primary part of living as a community member in Gloria House is an explicit acknowledgement that mainstream society has, somewhere along the way, got it wrong. Community members choose to step outside a culture they view as being largely defined by the pursuit of material goods and a pervasive alienation from each other. Community members came in search of an existence living in solidarity with others, in line with their principles, and in a way that allows for personal growth. Here is what one member said:

> I think some of the lives out there are some of the most convoluted and complex and so completely mediated and disconnected and jumping through so many unseen hoops just to get needs met that you can't even identify. I think what we're doing is paring down and finding that simple living is not about austerity not about asceticism but finding this real unadulterated joy [that comes] from love. And by that I mean human connection and I think that's what we're missing, that's at the heart of alienation.

Our interviews are replete with quotations like this. Here is another, which reveals a sense that modifying the shared moral world of habitation and social relationships is essential for remaking subjectivity and living a moral life (Kleinman 2006).

> As we try to create the world that we want, part of it is working on our own [stuff], not just pointing fingers. We are not just judging and saying that everything is wrong structurally in society and economically and with capitalism. That is true, but that's all within ourselves as well.

The intangible but deeply experienced sense of value that people found in their communities is poetically summarized on the first page of Culver Way's community notebook: "If 'tis gold you seek, you come to the right place. It practically flows from the faucets in this house, but to be sure you capture some to take on home with you, make sure you show up for a spontaneous potluck. We serve gold up fresh ... We grow some in the garden as well. It is written on the dry erase board in announcements, celebrations and plans for the future. Just for accounting purposes, have you found any gold around here?" The passage does not explicitly define "gold"; however Culver Way members seem to think of it as the essence of the community, the intrinsic nature of their shared

lives that is difficult to clearly pinpoint. It is clear that it does not signify any kind of material wealth, and the implication is that this "gold" is far more valuable than anything material.

It is these often intangible qualities of community living that we seek to shed light upon. In what follows, we present the benefits of intentional community living cited by our research participants in four different categories: economic, social, health and well-being, and environmental. It should be clear from what follows that these four categories are not perceived to exist independently of one another, but rather that they are quite integrated into a larger yet diffuse cultural model of what constitutes a livable life.

Social Benefits of Community Living

As stated previously, many of the participants in our research cited increased depth and breadth of social relationships as a primary benefit of intentional community living. This building of social capital was often seen as an end in itself, one that outweighed any explicitly economic considerations. Community members in the intentional communities we studied reported a ubiquitous emphasis on richer social support networks and opportunities for personal development and betterment. They reported feeling a very high level of support in the case of personal troubles and access to shared resources without the threat of perpetual debt. As one Karen House member put it, they have created "a rich tradition of people relying on one another instead of big savings accounts. Once you're in it there's a real safety and reframing of how we ought to live our lives. It just seems so much more possible."

At Culver Way there is an extensive support system that comes from having strong social ties to one another. Members reported relying on the community for emotional stability and reassurance during difficult times. At Dancing Rabbit, people emphasized the value of knowing one's neighbors and feeling like a meaningful part of a group of humans with shared values and complementary skills. One interviewee explained, "That's the great thing about living in a tiny, tight-knit community. You don't have to do everything yourself. The fellow villagers will help you with the things you're not great with." At Dancing Rabbit, intentional community living fostered a culture of helping and teaching one another.

Personal growth came up again and again as a primary benefit of living in community. One community member described Gloria House as "a community working towards our own personal liberation." She said, "People are a lot freer than they used to be." This liberation, found in intimate relationships, shared experience, and sustained reflection is a central tenant of community life. Individuals commented on their decision to stay in the community as a commitment to seeing it grow and progress. This sense of belonging and investment is a social benefit because it contributes to a person's sense of purpose. It appears that the appeal of so many projects and willing hands is not only the learning experience of tackling a new task, but the sense of power and agency that comes with being able to conceptualize an idea and follow through with it. There is a sense of empowerment that comes from being able to create rather than consume.

When we queried our participants about the benefits of intentional community living, the value of strong social ties and the opportunities for personal growth and development were clear. 75% of the community members we asked said that the quality of their social relationships had improved as a result of being part of the community. Further, 84% said that they had experienced more

opportunities for positive personal growth and development during their membership in the community. A clear vision emerges of these community members pursuing increased social capital as an end in itself.

Economic Benefits of Community Living

Responses regarding the economic benefits of community living were more mixed. In our questionnaire, only 31% of respondents reported that their economic security had improved as a result of being part of the community. 50% said their economic security had not improved. These results were somewhat surprising, but may make more sense when put in context. Negative responses to our questions about economic security typically indicated a narrow interpretation of the question followed by a reference to the fact that they now had other sources of security. One participant said: "This is a difficult question. I have less money and assets now than I used to but I feel much more secure because I have a very strong support network in the community around me." We repeatedly found people engaged in a struggle to reconcile their forgone economic security with their increased social security.

Community members found that their regular expenses were greatly reduced through the sharing of living spaces and utilities. In many cases, there is little overhead cost in terms of maintaining the living space, due to a combination of pooled resources and simple living. In some cases, community members recognized a positive feedback loop such that their expenditure levels were reduced as they spent more time developing social relationships rather than engaging in consumptive acts. This, in turn, enabled them to better live out their ideals because they were spending less time working to generate income for their consumption expenses. Perhaps the most important benefit is the feeling that one is no longer part of the go-go culture of capitalism. Here is what a worker at Karen House stated: "What's been interesting is how easy it is to continuously release from a lot of the things that society deems as really important and appropriate. I mean upward mobility and doing more, and being more effective and being bigger and being quicker. I think a lot of people in this country are really stressed out, all trying to go up this ladder."

Although no one in these communities appears to be making more money than they were before living in community, people tend to have fewer expenses. Because of this they are able to take jobs that would not be financially feasible were they living alone, outside of an intentional community context. It does seem worth noting that, for many community members, money is not the mark of security that it is for the rest of the world or even for them in their lives before they joined the community. Community members understand the power of money, but they choose not to invest the bulk of their time and energy acquiring it for current or future use.

Thus, underlying the basic reality of reduced expenses characteristic of intentional community living is the fact that such a situation enables people to construct and act out alternative forms of economic rationality where selling one's labor for money to meet daily consumptive expenses is replaced by a more direct and socially embedded economic system. An example from Gloria House bears this out. Within the community, money is clearly not the main currency, but neither is direct bartering. One member describes it as mutuality. "I think mutuality means I'm giving at a personal sacrifice to you and … you are giving to me, but it doesn't have to be accounted for. A barter is I'm going to rub your feet for an hour and you are going to watch my kid for an hour. We are not doing barter here. It just flows from my heart to want to do whatever I can, and others the same for

me…" This system of mutuality is one example of how a counterculture is created within Gloria House that is in line with member's ideals. Rather than taking part in what some consider to be the alienating and rigid process of exchanging money for goods and services, community members are able to serve each other if, when, and how they can.

Although finances may be precarious at Gloria House, no one seems overly concerned. One member said, "We don't do any accounting." She admitted that there were times when things were tight, and that she and her husband did not have any savings. Yet she said they were always able to pull together needed funds. She also spoke of investing in people and felt comfortable that she would be able to find security in her relationships as she grew older. Another community member mentioned how his parents had spent years adding money to a retirement fund and then had lost most of it in the recent economic downturn. Such evidence that money is not a promise of success, comfort, or happiness, even for those that subscribe to its power, allows members of Gloria House to live lives without accumulation of wealth as a principal aim.

Similarly, living at Dancing Rabbit allows for the of sharing resources which leads to a lower cost of living and thus less time spent working and more time with loved ones. One member recounted what a positive benefit it was to combine the homeplace and the workplace because it enabled him to more consistently spend time with his family. In addition, rather than outsourcing his labor to a firm with which he had no personal relationship, he was able to apply his labor more directly to the provision of his and his family's needs through the building of not only shelter and food systems, but also the construction of a community that would continue to provide support of many kinds in the years to come.

Environmental Benefits of Community Living

People's beliefs about the environmental benefits of community living were mixed as well, although the vast majority of our participants indicated that intentional community living had reduced their impact on the earth. People from communities such as Dancing Rabbit where environmental sustainability was a core shared value clearly emphasized environmental benefits more than people from other communities. However we did find a number of common themes that applied across individual case studies. First, a smaller ecological footprint was achieved through local food production, reduced consumption, and the social support of living with a group of people who shared environmental values. Second, consuming less and having a smaller ecological footprint led to the feeling of taking responsibility for oneself and increased one's sense of well-being while decreasing stress and lowering one's expenses.

At Dancing Rabbit, living an ecologically sustainable lifestyle is the norm. Having ecological living as the shared, overall goal of the entire community allows for experimentation and positive peer pressure. One interviewee described this phenomenon: "One of the really big benefits of living here… is you no longer feel like you're fighting against the current…Using social support and peer pressure, in a good way, helps you be sustainable rather than that constant feeling like you're fighting against this trend of consumerism." Another interviewee described the difference between striving to live sustainably before joining Dancing Rabbit with striving to live sustainably now: "One of my favorite things about living here is that everything is set up to be eco-friendly."

Building with natural, non-toxic material, using renewable energy, treating their waste on site in a sustainable manner, eating locally, organically, and seasonally, restoring their surrounding habitats, and reducing car usage are just some examples of the ways in which members are striving to live sustainable lifestyles. Living sustainable lives is a way that members and residents attempt to "live their values," a phrase which many interviewees mentioned. "I felt that I wasn't able to choose," one resident of Dancing Rabbit reflected on her time before moving there. "I wasn't able to choose how I powered my home. I wasn't able to choose what my home was built of. I wasn't able to choose where my water came from. It was all decided for me. I want to be able to live according to my values and my ethics."

For certain members of Culver Way, the community's focus on environmentalism was a motivating factor for wanting to live in the community. For others, the environmental emphasis was new and thus caused a shift in their own attitudes and behaviors that they attributed to the "implicit expectations" of the community. One member noted how the community was the force responsible for changing her behavior to align with the shared values of the group. Another member noted that the lifestyle characteristic of the community is an example to others of how living a life of less consumption and waste does not mean a life of more restriction, like many envision it might:

> We don't live like an army; it's not like strict living. In North America and Europe in general, there is this weird conception of individual freedom and ecological values, where they say they want to live environmentally friendly, but when it comes to making certain decisions, they feel like they are threatened, their individual space is threatened, or their individual values or freedom are threatened. But it's not like that, I'm living in a community, but I am not restricted in any way. That's an important thing; we should make sure people get this message. It is not like I am giving up all of my individual freedom.

The Catholic Worker movement calls for a "Green Revolution." Accordingly, a counterculture of simple living has thrived at Gloria House. A stated belief of many members of the community is a desire to live in tune with the natural world. Living simply – pooling resources, reusing materials, wasting less, respecting nature's rhythms and restoring their land to a healthy state through gardening and ecological design – allows community members to show their respect and gratitude for the earth. Farming was also cited by numerous residents as a source of meaningful work, both because of the pleasure that comes from being in nature and cultivating one's own food, and the freedom it gives an individual to lessen his or her dependency on corporate agricultural giants that are seen as having unjust and unsustainable practices.

Living by choice at a low level of economic expenditure can lead to minimal environmental impact, especially when explicit attention is devoted to environmental considerations. Members of CAMP report paying more attention to what they eat, learning to compost and grow their own food, and becoming much more conscious of personal levels of consumption and waste. 91% of our respondents reported that they believed their personal impact on the environment had decreased as a result of being a member of their respective communities. Clearly, intentional communities have a lot of potential to serve as models for low-impact, high-quality lives.

Health and Well-Being Benefits of Community Living

Community members' perceptions of the physical and mental health benefits of community living were mixed at best. 63% of respondents reported that their mental health had improved during their tenure as community members while 22% said that it had not improved. This can be explained with reference to the strong social support networks discussed before, with regard to the challenges of a holistic shift in lifestyle and, in the case of Catholic Worker communities, relative to living a life of service. One community member said, "I feel better about myself and my life. I feel more empowered to realize my dreams. I feel a sense of belonging and purpose. I am confident that I can create my own life without having it dictated by the dominant culture." On the other hand, some reflected on the difficulties and stresses of creating and living in community: "being responsible for positive communication (as opposed to yelling at one's neighbor and slamming the door for example) is a lot of work, and often stressful, as is doing all aspects of building the community ourselves." On a similar note, a member of Karen house noted that "hospitality work can be emotionally draining."

Perceptions of the physical health impacts of intentional community living were even more ambiguous. An equal percentage of respondents indicated that their physical health had and had not improved since they joined the communities. Even within the same community, many people reported contradictory experiences. For example, many respondents at CAMP suggested that their eating habits had greatly improved during their time in the community while one member indicated that hers had declined considerably. Similarly, at Dancing Rabbit some people indicated that a move away from their previous residence in an a polluted urban area had positive effects on their health while one member lamented that she did not have access to quality health care facilities as a result of living in a rural area. While these results are difficult to decipher and definitely require further research to explain definitively, they do reveal that everyone's experience of community living is quite different and dependent upon their prior living situations.

Shortcomings of Community Life

Community members expressed a number of difficulties they have experienced as a result of their decisions to live in an intentional community, but many of our respondents frame these shortcomings as challenges and suggest that confronting these challenges will ultimately prove beneficial. There are challenges associated with living together in such close quarters, such as a lack of privacy, the strains of being part of a social support system and sharing the burdens of others, a lack of relaxing private space in communities with higher population densities or high levels of public activity, and the inevitable differences regarding desired levels of household cleanliness that can come along with shared space. There are challenges owing to the transient nature of the populations; relationships form and then dissolve as some members move out. There is also the "burn out" that affects ecovillagers and catholic workers as the general problems that they are trying to address only worsen in the wider society.

On the other hand, shared living and collective struggle is part of the appeal. At Karen House, workers are said to "catch courage" from each other, as when elders provide younger workers with wisdom and advice, or when younger members encourage older generations to keep going: "A lot of us come from similar backgrounds...we are facing these realizations about the world together. It's really amazing to have all these people I respect [working on these things together]". While all members touched on the limitations of community living, all of them stated that the benefits far outweigh these limitations.

The difficulty of making group decisions was a repeated theme. Most of the communities we worked with use a process of consensus decision making which can be quite time consuming. One interviewee described his feelings about consensus decision making: "The thing that I value the most at Dancing Rabbit is the consensus decision making model. And the thing about Dancing Rabbit that is the most challenging to me is consensus decision making model...I get an idea in my head and I like to jump up and implement it…and it doesn't work that way! In most cases it has to go through community process…and that's sometimes frustrating to me." An essential truism of group work in any context is the difficulty of making collective decisions and the members of intentional communities are subject to these same constraints but within the context of their daily lives.

Living in such close contact with fellow community members allows for a strong sense of community and opportunity for deep interpersonal connections. It also means that unresolved disputes can affect the entire community. One interviewee said, "You can't just say, 'you are such an idiot' and slam the door and go home because you are going to see that person in a meeting. You are going to eat with them [later that day]…it is a big deal if people aren't getting along because really the repercussions are huge." One of the perceived benefits of individualized lifestyles is being freed from having to deal with conflict resolution on a daily basis. However many of the people in these communities believe finding methods and energy for effectively addressing interpersonal conflicts is essential to building social capital.

Other concerns revolved around the homogeneity of communities that are envisioned as models from which many could learn and benefit. Members of Gloria House expressed concerns over creating yet another segregated insular community. "The community is like a double edged sword in one way that it's so fantastic because you're surrounded by like minded people, and it's so comfortable, and there's just so much love. You can just fall back and there's somebody there to carry you. … But often what happens is it feels so good that we don't try to get out of the bubble. We just kind of create this fort for ourselves, and just hide in this warm bubbly fort, and we can become very insular. That could start to look like gentrification, that could look like racism. That could take on those forms that society has kind of set for us." Building social relationships not only within but across community boundaries is seen as a difficult but valuable and essential challenge for the community members we spoke with.

Policy Obstacles and Opportunities for Intentional Communities

Community members identified various policy obstacles and opportunities they have encountered in their intentional community-building endeavors. Building on these findings, we make some recommendations regarding ways in which academics and policy-makers might work with citizens and community members to facilitate intentional community building as one path among many toward more livable lives in St. Louis and beyond.

In some cases, existing policies are used to facilitate intentional community-building endeavors. For example, Culver Way accessed federal stimulus funds to help finance the purchase of adjacent abandoned buildings that they plan to renovate in order to provide space for their expanding community. Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage obtained funding from the federal government's Conservation Reserve Program to assist them in rehabilitating the degraded farmland on which they are developing their ecovillage by building ponds to slow erosion and conserve soil. Further,

Dancing Rabbit is formally incorporated as a land trust and a nonprofit 501(c)3 which enables people to make tax deductible contributions to their cause and makes them eligible for certain forms of public funding that they could otherwise not access. However, many intentional communities, such as the Catholic Worker houses, choose not to officially incorporate or utilize official policy programs, noting the contradiction between formal government recognition and the fundamental value of building communities that diverge from society's formal institutions and norms.

In other cases, specific policies obstruct efforts to build communities and achieve specific community goals. For example, Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage originally began forming in the San Francisco Bay area but soon recognized that local property values and zoning and building codes made it difficult to achieve their mission. They relocated to rural Missouri where they have access to cheap land and freedom from obstructive policies that govern their development. In addition, many urban areas have policies that regulate multiple occupancy in individual dwellings, the composting of food scraps, and the hanging of laundry, all of which our informants in St. Louis cited as measures that constrain their collective efforts. While these policies arise from real concerns about public health, they can also prevent effective action on fundamental problems of environmental sustainability and quality of life. One resident expressed the tension that arises when attempting to accomplish socially transformative goals within a policy context that imposes severe restrictions on their activities, saying: "Do we run away to the woods where we don't have to answer to anybody, do we continue to do what we want and hope that the policy part follows, or do we go for the policy part first?" This expressed tension simultaneously reflects the reasons that some intentional communities have sought refuge and freedom in rural areas and the desire of many communities to engage with and create change in the broader society.

Indeed, were some of these communities and others like them to be investigated, they might find that they had run afoul of various policies to protect public health, ensure uniformity and standards, and preserve perceived neighborhood qualities. When doing construction or rehabilitation work on their homes, for example, some intentional communitarians do not apply for building permits due to the cost and inconvenience, a recognition that their designs would likely be disallowed, and general disregard for state institutions. As a policy recommendation, we suggest that a city like St. Louis should reexamine current policies and government practices in order to strike a more appropriate balance between the need for health and safety standards and the interests of individuals and communities to enable alternative considerations of resource management and social capital that are linked to a politics of sustainability and community.

Streamlining permitting processes or allowing individuals and community organizations to have more freedoms in altering their property may encourage more people to modify their homes in sustainable ways that also build social capital. In a city like St. Louis, with many historic homes falling into disrepair, creating policies that facilitate renovations at a lower cost in terms of both time and money would allow people of a wider range of incomes to re-invest in the city. Where there is a policy void or policies are not enforced, the communities we worked with found ways to make their alternatives flourish even without official policy or fiscal support. So it is in the interest of municipalities to acknowledge the presence and vitality of intentional communities and develop inspection and policy procedures to allow them to be effective within the context of overarching principles and standards aimed to protect dynamic public interests.

Members of CAMP feel their mission is hindered by zoning restrictions and by conflictual relationships with municipal officials. While the group's zoning permit was revoked at one point, issues in dealing with a city official who, for reasons they feel have not been effectively expressed, does not fully support the group's community-building efforts, came up again and again. Some members of CAMP see him as the product of the city's ward-based system itself, which puts him in the position of having a very small tax base, limited resources, and the incentive to only work to achieve personal political gain and support at the expense of taking risks to achieve real changes over the long term. Policies meant to foster intentional communities may do best to heed a philosophy of "less is more." The state's resources may best be used in removing official barriers to community living and creating less time-consuming and cost-prohibitive building codes and housing regulations, especially when such communities aim to rejuvenate depressed urban areas. This approach acknowledges and respects that, for community living to be effective, it must begin with a ground-up, grassroots approach.

This issue of bureaucratic dynamics speaks to a much broader political problem in St. Louis. Some participants in our study expressed strong concerns about policies favoring corporate redevelopment of depressed areas. As a large developer is currently receiving significant tax incentives to buy up and redevelop abandoned properties, our informants voiced significant uncertainty and trepidation about the future of their communities. The existing residents of this area (intentional communitarians and otherwise) have not been consulted about their needs and desires for future redevelopment, and they fear that the current plans may force them out and permit gentrification. Members of the communities located in "blighted" neighborhoods argued that the city government should devolve more political agency to residents of such regions and limit the capacities for corporate builders and developers to dictate property values and land use patterns. One Karen House member suggested that city officials work with an "economic sustainable village mentality," which would be based not on direct outside investment and the consolidation of capital but rather on a trickle-up economics that could provide local jobs, trade, and pooled local resources.

When it comes to policy recommendations, there is also a need for policymakers and state institutions to better understand intentional communities, acknowledging that they are in fact not escapist recourses of imagined misfits but viable and increasingly popular mechanisms for rebuilding social capital. In order to improve the understanding of intentional communities and develop evidence-based policies, we encourage collaborative partnerships among academic researchers, existing intentional communities, and municipal officials. Such collaborations should involve critical analysis of existing policies that might limit positive alternatives and development projects; awareness of the needs, objectives, and perspectives of existing and emergent intentional communities relative to broader policies; and, educational programs to alleviate some of the stigma that can tend to surround intentional communities. Further collaborative research on the benefits and shortcomings of intentional communities should also be encouraged and the results used where appropriate to promote these forms of community building as a feasible option for people from many backgrounds. While there remains a need to critically assess the actual impact of intentional community living as compared to stated goals and objectives, and to interrogate their claims about improved social living in relation to the relatively homogenous composition of most intentional communities, we find that these living arrangements make economic, social, and environmental sense especially in a world where macro-economic systems are proving unstable and leading to a variety of negative outcomes for citizens, ecosystems, and governments

We recommend that scholars and political leaders create databases of intentional community best practices and make them available to interested citizen groups. Community living, cooperatives, and the social capital they build may become more prominent if awareness about the benefits of community living and the logistical knowledge related to community organizing are made more publicly accessible and visible. A first step for communitarians, researchers, and government-backed programs may be recognizing and publicizing the appeal and positive impacts of community living for both the individual and larger society. Further steps may involve making seed grants available to community groups on a competitive basis and providing access to relevant expertise and databases based on the experience of existing intentional communities and those who have studied and worked with them.

These communities are theoretically accessible to people of low incomes, but in practice, access is limited by a range of factors, including a general lack of knowledge about the benefits and possibilities of community living. Because expenses in these communities tend to be much lower than in private households it would seem relevant for policy makers and existing intentional communities to consider ways of expanding their demographic makeup. Low-income people may find that they could more easily meet their expenses in a collective context where expenses are shared, but it is unlikely that they would choose to live in such a community because the risks of exiting a normalized living and working pattern (where healthcare may be linked to employment, for example) may seem too high. So there is also a need to minimize the risks of intentional community living through not only grants but also linkages to existing and perhaps expanded social services and institutions.

One key issue for policy consideration involves challenging the dominant perception of intentional communities as reclusive or escapist. There are dynamic and fluid boundaries between the intentional communities we studied and the surrounding society. In all cases, explicit decisions were made to model alternatives within the wider society rather than completely separating from it. Hence, a policy development process to help facilitate the establishment and maintenance of intentional communities might involve support for public education programs like those offered by many of the communities themselves and a general public discussion to increase awareness of the tangible benefits. In this area, one policy opportunity available to intentional communities is the establishment of non-profit educational foundations such as Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage's 501(c)3.

In summary, our study acknowledges the importance of balancing universal public protection with flexibility for specific situations, making exceptions to or changing existing policies where strong community-based organizations have shown progress and requested variances. Our study also suggests that providing educational and financial resources and relevant expertise to foster intentional community building while increasing awareness and connecting vulnerable populations to alternative living arrangements could dramatically improve quality of life and economic situations for low-income and other vulnerable populations.

Conclusion

The eminent scholar of intentional communities and Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Southern Indiana has suggested that intentional communities provide invaluable laboratories and lessons for addressing fundamental social, humanitarian, and environmental issues (Pitzer, 2008, 2010). Other studies (Mulder et al 2006, Tinsley and George 2006, Broer and Titheridge 2010) have suggested the same, but the evidence remains largely anecdotal and fragmentary. Clearly more research is needed in this area. Collaborative partnerships should be formed to collect multiple forms of data over the long term.

Many diverse intentional communities are building models of participatory democracy, engaged citizenship, and sustainable living that scholars and policymakers should encourage and facilitate to the extent possible. However, there is an inherent danger in institutionalizing such endeavors because such formalization detracts from the diverse social impulses and specific needs and desires that drive intentional community building. In other words, effective intentional community building can only arise from within existing communities as fragmented as they might be.

We have seen that intentional community living can be very a positive experience for those who choose to be involved. It can provide greater economic security, increase levels of social capital and social support, create more ecologically sustainable lifestyles, and increase individuals' overall health and well-being. However, were intentional communities to become institutionalized within a formal policy framework, the desired effects are unlikely to be realized in the same way. Much of the positive impact of intentional communities comes from the original intent of community members to join together in pursuit of their shared vision of more livable lives. Before the physical community infrastructure can be created, there must be the desire to create a community and live with intention. Policies meant to facilitate intentional community living should remove legal barriers and provide official recognition, support, and funding opportunities without the overregulation and red-tape that many intentional communitarians feel constrained by.

Because many members of the communities we worked with have personally committed to living in a similar fashion and with shared values, they are able to begin to create the world, even if only on a small scale, that they would like to live in. As multiple community members explained, it is here that they must start lives that are more livable. Their successes and their failures are part of a deeply gratifying process of living a life that focuses on being rather than having.

Several themes come through in our analysis of these intentional communities. Members of these communities share in the idea that living in a tight-knit community of diverse members is itself an end in life, worth it "a million times over," as one member of Karen House put it. These people largely repudiate mainstream values that focus on individual achievement and material accumulation. Another big theme is that the community members share a belief that while they may seem to have adopted "alternative lifestyles" there is actually a much wider desire in the populace to live in simpler and more fulfilling ways. What this attitude reflects is a commitment to generate more of what the anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt (2006) calls "positive affect," meaningful and encouraging relationships that are essential, he argued, to human development and flourishing. What this amounts to is a major cultural change involving a shift in how we think about poverty and social problems and how we develop policies and communities that address them.

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