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Learning to live and work together in an ecovillage community of practice

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Abstract

Ecovillages are citizen-organised residential communities that strive for a more sustainable way of life based on a culture of cooperation and sharing, as deemed necessary to support a shift to a post carbon world (Dawson, 2006; Lockyer & Veteto, 2013; Korten, 2006). While much can potentially be learned from the study of these experimental sustainable communities, perhaps their greatest contribution is to help us understand how to transition from individualism and competition in order to live 'smaller, slower and closer (Litfin, 2014)'. Drawing on a social theory of practice (Wenger, 1998) and concept of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), this paper considers how one ecovillage is learning the social competencies necessary to live and work well "in community", and in doing so, it co-constructs and sustains a cooperative culture.

Keywords: Ecovillages; cooperative culture; social competencies; situated learning; communities of practice

Introduction

The jury's in: our capitalist-consumer culture has got to go. Ted Trainer sums up the argument as such:

...that affluent-industrial-consumer-capitalist society is grossly unsustainable, that rich world per capita levels of resource consumption and ecological impact are far beyond levels that can be kept up for long or that all the world's people could share, and that there must be large scale de-growth and radical system change if we are to solve the problems. (2016, p. 3)

Ecological footprint calculations for North America and Europe support this claim of overconsumption (Folke, 2013; Pretty, Ball, Benton, Guivant, Lee, Orr, Pfeffer & Ward, 2007), and scientific research suggests that it is responsible for severe disruption to three critical planetary processes – climate, biodiversity, and the nitrogen cycle (Folke, 2013). Furthermore, a growing number of critics align with Trainer's critique of the dominant paradigms of capitalism and consumerism, stating that in addition to fuelling inequality and other ill-being (Hall, 2009), they are also not making us happier, and

even undermining the foundations of life itself (Pretty et al., 2007). Detractors conclude that nothing short of complete systemic and cultural change is necessary (Clammer, 2016; Foster, Clark & York, 2010; Moore & Rees, 2013). Many have called for a re-definition of prosperity in the form of resilient, co-operative, materially (self)sufficient communities (cf. De Young & Princen, 2012; Heinburg, 2004/2005; Hopkins, 2008; Korten, 2006; McKibben, 2008). In other words, we need to live and work well in the places where we live.

Individuals and groups around the world are recognizing and responding to the need for a fundamental shift in how we live and work – perhaps best illustrated by the plethora of initiatives included in Paul Hawken’s (2007), review, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History Is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World*. Among these examples of restorative human enterprise are ecovillages - citizen-organised residential communities that seek to model alternative social and economic constructs, and be part of building a bio-regional culture of cooperation and sharing, as deemed necessary to support a shift to a post carbon world (Dawson, 2006; Korten, 2006; Lockyer & Veteto, 2013; Litfin, 2014;). Despite growing recognition that ecovillages provide opportunities to learn how to live more sustainably (Dawson, 2008; Lockyer & Veteto, 2013; Litfin, 2014), the processes of ecovillage learning have remained unexplored by academics.

Through this paper, I aim to take a small step forward in understanding ecovillage learning processes. Specifically, I explore how social competencies and a cooperative culture are built and sustained at an ecovillage (as part of a broader practice in living sustainably), and the role that learning plays in this process. To understand the learning process, I draw upon socio-cultural learning theory, in particular the concept of communities of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998). While, to my knowledge, this learning theory has not yet been utilized in order to understand the ecovillage learning process, very recent literature that draws upon CoP theory as a means of explaining and analysing learning in other grassroots sustainable community initiatives (Bradbury & Middlemiss, 2015; Burke, 2017) suggests its relevance. Through a case study of social competency development at an ecovillage, I explore the potential of the CoP concept to understand ecovillage learning, including the co-creation and practise of a sustainable and cooperative culture. Through this study, I find competence supported by the socio-cultural practices of the community, but also, I identify a structural barrier to full participation in cooperative practices that puts into question the true sustainability of the community.

Background

An ‘ecovillage’ – a term first used by Robert and Diane Gilman in *Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities: A Report for Gaia Trust* – is commonly understood as a ‘...human scale, full-featured settlement in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development, and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future (Gilman 1991, quoted in Dawson, 2006, p. 13)’. While still widely referenced, the original definition has been criticized for its light address of the social and spiritual dimensions of the ecovillage concept, and for failing to draw attention to some key ecovillage attributes, which Dawson suggests include ‘seeking to win back some measure of control over community resources (2006, p. 36)’ and acting ‘as centres of research, demonstration, and (in most cases) training (*ibid*)’. Liz Walker (2005), a long time ecovillage resident,

adds to our general understanding of the concept, referring to ecovillages as communities where members live out shared values in a cooperative manner, through alternative social structures and economies.

Although the number of ecovillages worldwide is unknown, the Global Ecovillage Network lists over 400 (self-identified) ecovillages, as well as several networks of traditional villages in the Global South (representing about 15.000 individual villages) that are transforming along more ecological and participatory lines (Litfin, 2014). Furthermore, the Communities Directory of the Federation of Intentional Communities suggests exponential growth of ecovillages in North America over a two-decade period, showing listings of intentional communities up from 304 in 1990 to 1,055 in 2010, with those communities identifying as ecovillages rising from 7% in 2007 to 32% by 2010 (Schaub, 2010).

While incredibly diverse, because their exact constitution varies dependent on the make-up of their inhabitants, and on their locality, ecovillages share a common desire to construct “low impact”, high quality ways of life, in harmonious relationship with their local and global ecologies (Joubert & Dregger, 2015; Litfin, 2014). Ecovillages strive to enact their desired lifestyle through a fairly common set of strategies: the design of ecologically-aware human settlements, promoting sustainable local economies, organic and local food production, earth restoration practices, social inclusion, and participatory, community-scale governance (Dawson, 2006). Also common, is the development of alternative economic and social arrangements, such as inclusive decision-making, cooperative enterprise, collective consumption, and ‘economic communalism’ (Lockyer, 2010), e.g. the common ownership and / or sharing of land, housing, businesses, vehicles, equipment/tools, and other infrastructure/resources (Dawson, 2006; Lockyer, 2010; Litfin, 2014).

Ecovillages, cooperative culture, and social competencies

Cooperative culture is at the heart of the ecovillage approach. Cooperative culture is not just about sharing (though that is an important part of it) - it is largely about a way of interacting that places relationships at the centre (Schaub, 2016). Participatory decision-making that values all perspectives, the peaceful resolution of conflict, and a ‘we’ (rather than ‘me’) mentality are all elements of cooperative culture. However, for people accustomed to operating in the fundamentally competitive and hyper-individualistic world of capitalism (Korten, 2006), a shift to a cooperative, sharing culture requires a significant amount of un/learning. But how, exactly, can a fundamental shift in a way of being be achieved? Gladwell (2002) posits that such fundamental change is achieved through the creation of a community, where new beliefs and behaviours can be expressed, nurtured, and practised. Thus, ecovillages – often described as places of experimentation and learning (Dawson, 2006; Litfin, 2014) – may provide productive learning spaces (Bradbury & Middlemiss, 2015) for expression of cooperative culture, including nurturing and practising how to live and work together.

The notion that we need to learn how to live together – a seemingly simple assertion – is recognized as a profoundly important competence for our current times, if we are to realize a sustainable future (c. f. International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, Delors, J., & Unesco., 1996). Litfin draws on the ideas of social theorist Philip Slater to suggest that our seemingly underdeveloped competence to live together in modern times is the result of our tendency to treat relationships (human-to-human and human-to-nature) like toilets, where: ‘...unwanted matter,

unwanted difficulties, unwanted complexities, and obstacles (2014, p. 53)' are thought to disappear when removed from our immediate vision, but as a result we see a decrease in '...the knowledge, skill, resources, and motivation necessary to deal with them (*ibid*)'.

Beatriz, an affluent Columbian identified in an article by Burke & Arjona (2013), provides a good example of how a lack of cooperative live-work competency (particularly in a situation of self-organisation) can unhinge the ability to pursue a way of life centred on *bien-ser* (good-being) and *bien-vivir* (good-living). Beatriz, along with her would-be ecovillagers, found that their ultimate challenge was not in learning how to farm or to construct buildings for the first time, but that they '...lacked tools, experiences, and wisdom to coexist in harmony, resolve conflicts, and make consensus an instrument of genuinely egalitarian, collaborative decision making (Burke & Arjona, 2013, p. 240)'. Beatriz's story is not unique. In fact, long term ecovillage resident and group process consultant Dianne Leafe Christian (2003) estimates that nine out of 10 ecovillage attempts fail. Moreover, while the reasons are many (failure to find the necessary land or money being key ones), of those that actually "break ground", the lack of necessary social competencies is often thought to contribute heavily to their demise. That considered, those ecovillages that have managed to continue to exist – some for decades now – provide insight on how learning how to live and work together within a cooperative culture is central to the ecovillage experience. In this paper, I present the findings of a case study of Whole Village – an ecovillage in Canada – to illustrate the centrality of this learning process, and then, I utilize the concept of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) to frame a discussion on this learning process. I begin with a brief review of the theory of situated learning, and the concept of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), to support the discussion.

Situated learning, communities of practice, and legitimate peripheral participation

Ecovillages are lived worlds – as such, the socio-cultural traditions of learning theory can be used to help us understand the ecovillage learning experience, particularly when applied to consideration of the socially interactive process of learning how to live and work together. Such theory goes beyond understanding learning as a cognitive process, to consider how learning happens in and across social and cultural constructs, including how people are shaped by their social worlds and have the power to shape them (Niewolny & Wilson, 2009; Worthen, 2014). As Worthen notes, rather than thinking about how people learn in terms of what their brain is doing, '...a person learns a certain way because of how they relate to the world and the social relationships around them' (Worthen, 2014, p. 41).

Russian theorist L. S. Vygotsky introduced many important concepts that influenced and have shaped socio-cultural learning theory today. One such concept was his suggestion that learning occurs through communication, and it is language that mediates this learning (Worthen, 2014). As will be shown later in this paper, language and communication are significant factors in learning how to live and work together in an ecovillage. Another important concept introduced by Vygotsky is the "zone of proximal development" that suggests we learn, by working with others, what we would otherwise not have been able to learn on our own, but also, we learn more rapidly if we work with others that have more expertise (Worthen, 2014). Stemming from this Vygotskian concept is the theory of "situated learning", and the concepts of

“communities of practice” and “legitimate peripheral participation”, formulated by Lave and Wenger (1991).

For Lave and Wenger, ‘...learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world (1991, p. 35)’, and the learning experience is influenced by how learners are situated in the social world. Thus, peripherality is a reference to the learners location in the social world, and ‘changing locations and perspectives are part of actors’ learning trajectories, developing identities, and forms of membership (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 36). Furthermore, Lave and Wenger’s interpretation of the zone of proximal development takes a collectivist / societal perspective, placing ‘...more emphasis on connecting issues of sociocultural transformation with the changing relations between newcomers and old-timers in the context of a changing shared practice (1991, p. 49)’. Lave and Wenger (1991) utilized the term “communities of practice (CoP)” to broadly refer to the sociocultural practices of a community – refraining from being too prescriptive of what might constitute a CoP. However, they originally drew on the study of apprenticeship, to explain how learning happens within the social context of the workplace, and in particular, how knowledge is passed on from workplace veterans (full participants) to newcomers (peripheral participants) through co-participatory training. Central to the concept of CoP is the notion of membership, which is necessary for participation, and consequently, for the learning to occur (Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson & Unwin, 2005). CoP members mutually engage in a joint enterprise, utilizing a common repertoire or competence, gained through knowledge shared in order to improve collective practice (Seaman, 2008). However, as Handley, Sturdy, Finchman and Clark (2006) point out, a CoP should not be viewed as simply an opportunity to learn, through participation and practice, in an instructional sense (e.g. learning a technical skill). Rather, CoPs enable conveyance of less tangible, yet equally important aspects of learning to engage successfully in the community, such as the learning of values and norms. Thus, CoPs could be considered both a socialization process, and a collective, experiential learning process for constructing and gaining competence in common practice. Furthermore, Lave and Wenger (1991) saw legitimate peripheral participation as serving a dual purpose: 1) the development of knowledgeably skilled identities in practice, and 2) the reproduction and transformation of communities of practice. This dual purpose highlights an understanding of learning as an on-going process that occurs in practice, as well as the negotiated and dynamic nature of the community of practice, which Wenger later described to be ‘...an emergent structure, neither inherently stable nor randomly changeable (1998, p. 49)’. Thus, Wenger portrays learning and social reproduction / transformation in a CoP as cyclical, co-processes, involving the negotiation of meaning (through interpretation and action), participation (through membership in a social community, including identity construction), and reification (‘...the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into “thingness” (1998, p. 58)’), which shapes experience, and also enables shaping the community.

While CoPs are a distinct concept within a social theory of practise, some authors point to the conflation of the concept with “learning communities”; thus, with the terms used interchangeably to understand learning as

...the ongoing refinement of practices and emerging knowledge embodied in the specific action of a particular community. Individuals learn *as* they participate in everyday activity within a community (with its history, assumptions and cultural values, rules, and patterns of relationship), with the tools at hand (including objects, technology, language). (Fenwick, 2008, italics in original, quoted in Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p. 122)

Recent literature on sustainable communities (i.e. eco-communities modelling more sustainable ways of life) has suggested they are communities of practice – sometimes applying the theory articulated by Wenger (1998), or simply using the broader interpretation described above (cf. Bradbury & Middlemiss, 2015; Burke, 2017; Cato, 2014; Poland, Dooris & Haluza-Delay, 2011). While still a very small literature, it certainly points to the relevance of the theory and the possible potential to utilize the CoP concept to explore both the processes of learning and the social co-construction of communities engaged in the various practices of sustainability – communities ‘...where logics of practice relevant to the triple threat [climate change, peak oil, and ecological degradation] are legitimated and performed (Poland et al., 2011, p. ii208)’.

As a live-work arrangement, organised under the values of cooperation between people, and of people with nature (Litfin, 2014), the ecovillage could be considered a cooperative practice of living well in a defined place. Also, as self-organised and self-governed communities, the ecovillage is intended to be an empowering practice of sustainable living, empowering people both physically and psychologically, which, according to Avelino and Kunze (2009), occurs primarily through “community building”, and the community principles of “participating” and “sharing”. Findings of the case study presented in the section that follows demonstrate how key social competencies for engaging and sharing within a cooperative culture are developed, not by simple transmission / acquisition, but through on-going participation in the social practices of the ecovillage community.

The case study: Whole Village

Whole Village ecovillage is situated on approximately 200 acres of communally owned agricultural land, just outside the town limits of Orangeville, Ontario, Canada (pop. ~ 30,000), about one hour’s drive northwest of the metropolis of Toronto. Approximately 25 people of various ages, including families, singles, and retirees, lived in the community at the time of this study. The majority of Whole Village residents live in Greenhaven – the 11-suite co-housing building – and membership in the Whole Village Property Cooperative (the owner of the land and buildings) is based on a purchase of one of these suites (shareholders are hereafter to referred to as “owners”, as is common verbiage in the community). Approximately half of the suites were lived in by owner-members at the time of the study, with the other rented until the suites are sold (which has been years in some cases). Additional residents rent rooms in the farmhouse, which is generally reserved for farmers and interns of the community-supported agriculture (CSA) enterprise.

Other than the CSA, and Bed & Breakfast accommodations offered in two summer-season cabins, there are no businesses at Whole Village. Social labour – i.e. the unpaid, intra-organizational work that is commonly undertaken by members in a cooperative (Quarter, Mook, & Armstrong, 2009) – in the form of expected community service hours, is part of the community agreement at Whole Village. This social labour may involve food production (gardening, preserving, cooking community meals), common household work, land stewardship, and organizational (e.g. facilitation, committee work) or administrative activities (e.g. bookkeeping, note taking). These community service expectations apply to all community members, whether owner or renter.

All decisions of the Cooperative are made using the consensus decision-making process (though a back-up voting system is in place, but has rarely been used). Every

resident can participate in this process, regardless of share status, but only shareholder members have the option to “block” a decision, which essentially means that a proposal cannot proceed. It can take time for a group new to consensus to learn how to use a “block” decision appropriately. According to Butler and Rothstein (2007), a legitimate block must be based on the principles of the group, not of the individual. Therefore, it is impossible for a group to use consensus effectively if they have not established a shared vision/purpose, and principles/values, which focus the group during times of discussion and decision-making (Christian, 2003). Whole Village’s founding documents include a stated vision and guiding principles.

Several mandate groups (i.e. committees) – also open to participation of all residents - exist to make operational decisions, develop policy proposals, and organize community social and educational activities. Overall, Whole Village’s practices are guided by its primary objective, described as striving to be a community with a ‘commitment to sustainability and land stewardship seeking to live together in harmony with each other and with the natural habitat (Whole Village, n.d)’.

Methods

Case study data was obtained during four months of field research at this ecovillage in 2014, and involved document analysis, observations, and eight in-depth interviews of 4 owners and 4 renters. Based on extensive literature review on practices of cooperative culture / sustainable community, key social competencies were identified, and then used as categories for data collection and analysis; these were: inclusive discussion and decision-making; honest and compassionate communication; non-violent conflict management; embracing diversity of people and perspectives; and inner work, such as trying to be less reactive and more reflective. During interviews, case study participants were asked to reflect on how these competencies were supported and/or improved through their participation in the community.

Findings

During the individual interviews, when I asked one of the interviewees whether living in community was hard, the considered response was: ‘I don't want life to be about a smooth ride, I want good suspension so I can ride it out’. This case study provided rich data on ecovillager perspectives on what “good suspension” means in the context of community living. In the sections that follow, I focus on the responses of interviewees to highlight learning in relation to the key social competencies of community living. Then, in section 5, I integrate these findings with a discussion on Whole Village as a community of practice.

Discussion and decision-making

Many of the respondents felt that their capacity to participate effectively in community discussions and decision-making was fostered and supported at Whole Village, regardless of whether they came there with very little or significant prior experience in a cooperative community setting. Several respondents suggested Whole Village had established a good, inclusive process for discussion and decision-making, and

commended the consensus process and residents' ability to use it. Some respondents made reference to how personal growth had improved their ability to participate in the process, making statements like: 'I have learned to assert myself'; 'I was so quiet at first no one had any idea what I was thinking, but now I participate', and 'Now I know if I am not heard, that is not ok – I have a right to be heard'. Many of the respondents suggested that their abilities were improved simply through watching and practising, with some being more specific, referring to the regular rotation of meeting facilitation or note-taking duties that enabled practice. One respondent criticised the decision-making process however, stating that use of consensus only works if you have a common vision, and further suggesting a lack of group cohesion in respect to the community's stated vision - that it does not adequately represent the people that live there now. Finally, a common sentiment expressed by renters was that they did have a tendency to 'hold back' during discussion at times, knowing that they did not have a right to block or vote should they be seriously concerned by a decision – which puts into question the level of authentic engagement and inclusivity that the process enables.

Communication

On competencies for honest and compassionate communication, some respondents suggested that their communications skills improved, and that the culture of Whole Village helped to 'grow our capacity for healthy dialogue' through example and practise; as one respondent put it: 'here we learn to tell people the truth, unlike the rest of the world'. However, others suggested that their ability to communicate well varied from person to person, and thus was reflective of their inter-personal relationships; as one respondent said, 'if you love a person you can be open and honest, and you can take criticism from them'. Also, a few respondents pointed out that honest and compassionate communication were not the same thing, and that while they may be learning to 'be more honest', they are still having some difficulty with 'the compassionate part'. Also, another person suggested that good communication goes beyond being honest and compassionate, as it is about being able to speak so that someone else can 'hear you', which this person noted is not always easy when people come to a conversation with different perspectives.

Respondents mentioned several practices and tools that they felt helped them learn to speak so that someone can "hear" them. One was The Gifting Circle (Christian, 2005) – a forum sometimes used to provide a safe and respectful way to share feelings and perspectives one-on-one, but done in a group setting, with participants rotating through partners. Another was non-violent communication (NVC) – which involves use of language that aims to build compassion and understanding (Rosenberg, 2015). Practising NVC involves formulaic statements along the following lines: 'When I observe X, I feel Y because I need Z. So I'm asking you to do Q (Litfin, 2014, p. 123)'. Some statements were made about NVC being a part of the culture at Whole Village, and therefore, while not everyone expressed confidence at being 'good at it', they felt they had many opportunities to watch and learn from others. Furthermore, a tool used during meetings – a bell or gong-style bowl – was mentioned as helpful, to be used whenever a person feels the discussion is getting too heated and people's perspectives are not being heard. Once the sound maker is used, talking ceases and attendees are expected to sit in silence and reflect on the discussion, until the group is ready to resume the discussion. In addition, a few people mentioned the book "Getting Real" by Susan Campbell (a highly suggested reading in the Whole Village membership package), as a

resource that helped them understand what honest and compassionate communication is all about.

Despite all of the support identified for fostering honest and compassionate communications at Whole Village, many respondents suggested this is an area where it is easy to ‘slip up’. One respondent felt that the challenge lay in a failure to practise (‘we have the tools but we don’t practise enough’), but also acknowledged that group competence varies as people come to the community at different times and may not have not been around when a particular skill set was being actively developed (e.g. a time period when monthly discussions were organized around the 10 skills for effective communication identified in “Getting Real”). In addition, some respondents suggested that open and honest communication was impacted somewhat by personality types (e.g. ‘I find it difficult to be honest with some people – they’re too sensitive’; ‘some of us can only do it in contrived settings, like the gifting circle’). Also, as another respondent pointed out, the effectiveness of all these tools really depends on each individual’s willingness to change their own behaviour. Finally, while most people felt that Whole Village fostered honest communication by creating an environment that discouraged gossip / talking behind people’s backs, others felt that ‘a good rant’ was helpful once in a while to help them ‘sort things out’, and then to be able to engage in a conflict situation with more compassion.

Conflict resolution

The majority of respondents felt that the ability to manage conflict non-violently was fostered and supported at Whole Village. Several respondents made reference to specific processes that support conflict resolution, such as activities organized by the Community Dynamics Mandate Group (CDMG) that are incorporated into community meetings, and the support provided by CDMG members (e.g. if a conflict cannot be resolved by the involved parties, CDMG members will step in and assist). In addition, several residents were mentioned as having particularly good process skills, and who acted as process coaches for discussion, decision-making and conflict resolution.

Also, there was reference made to needing to learn the appropriate time and place to address conflict issues. For instance, one respondent suggested that waiting until the weekly “check-in” meeting was inappropriate, especially if it meant that feelings about the issue had time to fester. Others suggested that full community forums may be inappropriate places to address inter-personal conflicts, as the individuals involved may feel ‘under attack’ in a group setting, and it could be perceived as ‘dumping your emotional baggage on everyone’.

Again, personal growth was mentioned by several respondents in respect to the development of their conflict resolution abilities; for instance: ‘I don’t run away as much now’, and ‘I’m learning I can disagree with someone and still care about them’. In addition, there was mention of the important role that building understanding and trusting relationships – a process that can take some time – plays in supporting the communication necessary for non-violent conflict resolution. For instance, as one respondent suggested, ‘you can be freer around people you’ve known for a long time’. Several others mentioned “The Gifting Circle”, if regularly practised, as contributing to the alleviation of inter-personal conflicts. Finally, if the conflict resulted from miscommunication, one respondent suggested that the best way to deal with it is, ‘to take ownership for your miscommunications, then let it go’.

Embracing diversity

There were varied opinions on how well diversity of people and perspectives were fostered and supported at Whole Village. In respect to people, several respondents noted that they thought they did ‘pretty well’ in respect to age, gender and sexual diversity, but that they were not ‘quite diverse enough’, with several specifically referencing ethnic diversity as an area where they were challenged. Furthermore, in respect to diversity of people, one person suggested that the economic structure of the community, which realistically made securing permanent residency at Whole Village affordable only for retirees with adequate finances and professionals who earned a living off-site, meant that it was essentially impossible to foster long-term economic diversity.

Respondents did not address the issue of diversity of perspectives significantly, though there appeared to be a general sense that they naturally fostered a diversity of perspectives through the consensus decision-making process. However, one respondent did say that ‘it feels like different perspectives are scary for some people’. Also, another made a distinction between the practices of living together and working together when suggesting that it may be easier to accept differences in perspectives when you’re on some sort of committee (i.e. a work setting), but that is gets harder when dealing with matters of living together because its more intimate.

Personal growth

A large part of engaging well in community appears to be dependent on how you react to and relate to others. When asked about whether or not they had become less reactive since living at Whole Village, the majority of those who identified as being highly reactive expressed that they found it was very difficult to change this inclination, despite being in a supportive environment; as one respondent put it: ‘it’s hard to change life-long patterns’. Additionally, one person stated ‘I feel like I’m being more reactive since I came here’, making reference to the additional “triggers” of community living that resulted both from specific tensions and simply from a greater number of interactions that result from living closely with people.

In respect to the fostering of reflectivity, the majority of respondents felt that they were already quite reflective before they came to Whole Village, or were inspired to reflect more on their behaviour since living there, with only two admitting that they were probably ‘not reflective enough’. One respondent mentioned The Gifting Circle specifically, as a community activity that has caused them to be more reflective, stating that “‘powerful’ is not part of my self-image, but I have learned (through the gifting circle) that what I say can hurt people, so I need to be able to reflect on my own behaviour’. However, one respondent suggested that reflection can sometimes be difficult, especially when you are feeling vulnerable and in ‘self-defence mode’. Two respondents identified a strategy they have learned at Whole Village that has helped them to be both less reactive and more reflective, particularly when conflict arises: ‘never assume bad intent’. Another suggested it would be helpful if everyone took up meditation, so that everyone could come ‘more fully to the table’.

The responses provided by interviewees made it clear that social competencies were supported through community practices and developed through their everyday engagement in community life. The learning process – for both community newcomers and relative old timers (Wenger, 1998) – will be articulated further below, drawing from an understanding of the concept of communities of practice.

Discussion - Whole Village as community of practice

The newcomer experience

When you first move to Whole Village, you have to figure out how things work. The initiation period is an intensive, immersion learning that may be cognitively and emotionally challenged by the unfamiliar, including the realization that how you have become accustomed to doing things elsewhere (everything from the mundane, like laundry – to the complex, like decision making), just does not work the same way here. Negotiating this process as a newcomer is like entering into a community of practice, where the practices, values, norms and relationships of the community are learned (Handley et al., 2006), and where Whole Village becomes both the context for learning, and the object of learning (i.e. learning the practice of living “in community”). During the first few months of living at Whole Village newcomers learn, with the assistance of veteran community members, the community’s practices (e.g. collective food growing, purchasing and common meals) and the processes (e.g. the consensus-based decision making process used at meetings), as well as what is expected of them (e.g. show up to weekly ‘check-in’ and monthly Meetings of the Round; sign-up for a common area cleaning job), and how to engage with others using nonviolent communication. These practices and processes, as well as the formal community documents (e.g. vision statement, guiding principles, policies, guidance documents), reify the community’s value of cooperative culture.

The community has developed tools and processes that assist the newcomer to integrate and operate successfully within the community, such as the Orientation Package that contains a copy of all Whole Village bylaws and policies, the Participation Expectations document, and the Community Covenant (that includes guidance on how to ‘strive to be the best version of myself’). New residents are also assigned a mentor to help them understand how things ‘get done’ in the community, including how to navigate the community’s governance system and procedures (e.g. who to ask if you want to keep bees). In addition, the mentor may provide insight on the politics and culture of the community, which helps the newcomer navigate community sensitivities (e.g. figuring out why certain things are done in a certain way before making a suggestion on how you would do it differently), inter-personal relations, and invisible structures of power. These resources available to newcomers support their “participation” in the community, which Wenger (1998) articulated as part of the process of constructing “identities” in relation to those communities; in other words, the support provided by the community to acclimatize to, and take part in, the community’s culture and practices, is part of the newcomer’s process of developing an identity of “ecovillager” and competent member in a community engaged in the construction and enactment of cooperative culture.

The on-going process of learning to live “in community”

While the process of initiation into the Whole Village community may appear to be largely adaptive, the case study findings revealed that the learning of community practices – particularly as they relate to social competencies – is an on-going, dynamic process. Throughout interviewee responses on social competency development, various references were made to both informal and organized ways that these competencies were fostered or supported by community practices. For instance, organised approaches included: group study (e.g. discussion of suggested readings), organised activities (e.g. community dynamics exercises during meetings), established processes (e.g. conflict

resolution), the practice of rotating roles (e.g. facilitation; note-taking), monitoring the meeting of accomplishments (e.g. the points system used for kitchen work), and the use of experts (e.g. group process consultants they had hired to teach NVC or to help resolve conflicts, using role play for example). However, informal interactions and the ‘culture of Whole Village’ was also frequently referenced as a contributor to how learning happened in the social context, by watching others and regular practice. One respondent summed up the difference between the organised and informal / cultural practices as follows: ‘through the formal ways I’ve learned the specifics about how to live in [this] community and through the informal ways I’ve learned the bigger picture stuff - how to *be* in community’. In addition, while the social environment was identified as a contributor to the development of cooperative live-work competencies, interviewees also pointed to the influence of the inter-personal relationships, their personalities, and their willingness to look at their own behaviour and make changes if necessary, as either supportive or inhibitive for the development of competencies to live and work in community. As several respondents pointed out, building social competence within the cooperative culture of the community is a slow, and often all-consuming process.

The impact of marginal participation

The case study revealed that learning social competencies at Whole Village was an integral part of newcomer experience, supported by community resources and practices, and that the learning process was largely believed to be never ending, thus also an integral part of the experience of full members in this CoP. However, the case study also revealed a potential barrier to becoming a “socially competent being” and developing an identity of “full participant” in this CoP. Renters expressed a tendency to moderate their interactions based on their real and perceived position of being relatively less powerful, which, in essence, could impact their learning trajectory and relegate them to the position of “peripheral participant”.

When discussing the notion of “legitimate peripheral participation”, Lave and Wenger (1991) described it, not as an inherently negative or marginal position within a community, but rather, as an “opening” – a means to access the resources of the community and to develop understanding through growing involvement in the community. However, they also considered the possibility of marginal participation, i.e. ‘alienation from full participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 42)’ that might result from unequal positions of power within a community, and thus, which might ‘...truncate possibilities for identities of mastery (*ibid*)’. Such marginal non-participation (Wenger, 1998) did appear evident, to some extent, in the experience of renters within the Whole Village community of practice (related to the social practice of discussion and decision-making, most specifically). In one case it was revealed quite literally by a renter when they described their positional identity within the community as one of “placeholder”, residing there only until someone came along who could afford to buy the suite. This evidence suggests the existence of a structural barrier to the construction of an identity of competence.

The existence of such a structural barrier to identity construction may be one of individual concern for the participant, but it is also one of communal concern. The concept of communities of practice links participation and identity construction to the on-going reproduction and transformation of the community. Enacting a cooperative culture – which includes a foundational notion of inclusivity – is heavily challenged, I would suggest, by a structural barrier to participation, as appears evident at Whole

Village. Thus, it could mean that the ultimate objective of this CoP is being undermined, which puts into question the sustainability of this community – a problem for everyone involved.

Conclusion

In attempting to create a low-materialism, communal live-work arrangement, ecovillages develop practices of living well in place. Central to these practices is the creation and enactment of cooperative culture, including the social competencies necessary for living and working together. These competencies – inclusive discussion and decision-making, honest and compassionate communication, non-violent conflict resolution, embracing diversity of people and perspectives, and undertaking the necessary personal growth work that supports the outer-focused practices of cooperative culture – though generally not given much thought in the sustainability literature, with its focus on socio-technical practices (e.g. switching to renewable energy use), may actually be key to supporting the community-building that some would argue is foundational to sustainability (Litfin, 2014). This paper has shown how the concept of ‘communities of practice’, first articulated by Lave and Wenger (1991), and stemming from the socio-cultural theory of situated learning, provides a way to understand how these social competencies are learned through membership and participation in the ecovillage. Understanding this learning process provides crucial insight into a part of a much broader process of education and learning for a transition to sustainability. Given the usefulness of the concept of communities of practice for understanding the learning processes involved in developing the practice of cooperative living at Whole Village, I would recommend this approach for broader application, to consider how ecovillages foster learning for sustainability, and how they practise living well “in place”, from all aspects of the ecovillage model of sustainability – ecological, social, economic, and worldview (GEESE, 2012).

Important to consider however, is the role that power inequality may play in a sustainability practice. The Whole Village case study showed that practising sustainability – specifically, the interactive practices of cooperative culture - can be undermined by structural barriers that may inhibit moving peripheral participants toward full membership in the community. Ironically, in the case of Whole Village – a community engaged in practices of economic communalism as a means to resist and create alternatives to the dominant, ecologically –devastating practices of capitalism and consumerism – a barrier to full participation in their practices is rooted in the economics of the community; specifically, the high cost of living and low-income potential of small-scale, ecological food production – two factors that, combined, put the possibility of suite purchase out of reach for many of the renters at Whole Village. That these factors reflect the broader socio-economic landscape within which the community is embedded, points to what Baker (2013) succinctly identified as the challenge of trying to build a sustainable community in an unsustainable world.

Trying to enact radical alternatives within a broader context that is at odds with what is trying to be enacted is a common condition for any radical experiment; one that may be insurmountable for utopian experiments, as was the case for many an intentional community of past (Brown, 2002). However, the existence of ecovillages – some new start-ups, some reinventions of communities that began in the 1960s (Dawson, 2006) – shows the enduring persistence of “active hope” (Macy & Johnstone, 2012) in the possibility of more sustainable ways of living. And what is needed in addition to hope,

are commitment and patience. As Cato posits, ‘In terms of sustainability learning... we are all apprentices, we are all learning together and learning to live sustainably is going to be a project of several generations at least (2014, p. 18)’ – a learning that can be supported, transformed, and reproduced within inter-generational communities of practice.

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