

UNCONSCIOUS MOTIVATIONS FOR JOINING AN INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY - A PSYCHOSOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: *The current case study applies a psychosocial perspective in exploring the unconscious motivations for joining an intentional community of the ecological type. It argues that through group membership community residents unconsciously seek to fulfill their psychological needs, including the needs for self-affirmation, security and attachment. Due to the lack of a shared goal, lack of structure and norms, as well as periods of social disintegration, the group fails to satisfy these needs, which is interpreted as a primary cause for the high levels of anxiety and psychological fatigue reported by individual members.*

Keywords: ecovillage, intentional community, psychological needs, psychosocial approach

INTRODUCTION

Intentional communities (see Brown, 2002) have seen an increase in academic interest, and appropriately so given the estimated 350 communities in Europe alone, some of them as big as several hundred members (see Wurfel, 2014). The scale of this social phenomenon begs the question as to what motivates people of various backgrounds to leave the macro society and experiment with new models of existence. Researchers have taken notice of this question, yet have largely relied on the community members' own words and rationalization when addressing it. What surveys and interviews fail to shed light on are the unconscious aspects of decision-making and behaviour. Using an intentional community of the ecological type as a case study, the current paper studies the unconscious motivations for joining the community from a psychosocial perspective. The latter assumes that people seek group membership in order to fulfill their primitive psycho-emotional needs. I demonstrate how this analytical approach sheds light on much of the group dynamics in the community.

Given the great diversity of intentional communities in terms of purpose, it seems more feasible to limit the discussion only to the ecological ones, commonly referred to as “ecovillages” (see Van Schyndel Kasper, 2008). Researchers seem to identify three broad categories of motivations, including worldviews / values, meaning and belonging, as well as practical / material considerations. The first category refers not only to environmental concerns, i.e. the willingness to lead a more environmentally-friendly existence (Kirby, 2003; Cho et. Al., 2008; Van Schyndel Kasper, 2008; Holleman and Colombijn, 2011; Lockyer, 2011; Sargisson, 2011) , but also to taking a socio-political stance against the macro society, while attempting to offer a social alternative (Andelson, 1998; Sargisson, 2001; Kirby, 2003; Meijering et. al., 2007; Jones, 2011;

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Lockyer, 2011). The second category of motivations pertains to the social needs of individuals, especially the need for belonging - "establishing a firm connection with other like-minded individuals and generating the sense of trust and reciprocity that a satisfying community life offers" (Kirby, 2003, p. 327; see also Kozeny, 1995; Jones, 2011; Lockyer; 2011). Finally, practical considerations, such as lower costs of life (Andelson, 1998; Lockyer; 2011), better living standards (Cho et. al., 2008; Jones, 2011), healthy and safe environment (Kirby, 2003; Van Schyndel Kasper, 2008), and childcare arrangements (Andelson, 1998), among others, have also been reported, albeit to a lesser extent.

What all these authors share in common is their reliance on surveys, interviews and group discourse as the primary methods for data collection. The only exception is Jones (2011) who concludes that practical / lifestyle considerations are more prominent than some individuals tend to admit. He does so on the basis of some people's willingness to stay in the communities as tenants, coupled with their unwillingness to join as members and take on all commitments and responsibilities that membership entails. Apart from this observation, all other pieces of research offer insight only into those aspects of the members' motivations, which they are capable of (and willing to) verbalize. In order to verbalize their motivations, members need to be consciously aware of them. However, as research in the fields of psychology and behavioural economics shows, much of the motivation underlying decision-making and behaviour remains at the unconscious level (see Forgas et. al, 2005; Kahneman, 2011). It is therefore essential that motivations for joining a community be studied through methods different from surveys, interviews and group discourse.

Apart from the individual-level methods applied in psychology (see Forgas et. al, 2005; Kahneman, 2011), group level processes may also provide insight into unconscious motivations. The current paper makes use of the psychosocial tradition, which employs psychoanalytic concepts on group-level phenomena, to study the unconscious motivations of individuals to join a small (10-20 members, aged 23 to 84, with a majority of members under 40yrs) ecologically-oriented international community, located within the EU, which has existed for 16 years. It is like many other ecological communities in terms of egalitarian organization, resource sharing and consensus decision-making. There is no official ideology or faith that members adhere to. What it stands out with are several striking characteristics of community life: 1) the seeming lack of social structure and a clear goal; 2) the alternation of highly intimate bonding, on the one hand, and intense social conflict and tension, on the other; 3) as well as the relative lack of permanent membership, with its residents staying up to two years on average. The reason why people with long-term intentions end up leaving somewhat quickly has to do with them experiencing intense anxiety, depression and burn-out, according to their own and other members' reports.

I argue that all these characteristics of community life are parts of a broader phenomenon which can be identified through a psychosocial lens. Instead of relying solely on the members' reports, individual motivations to join the community are interpreted in the light of universal psycho-emotional needs. The failure of the group to satisfy these needs is seen as the root cause of intragroup conflicts, high levels of anxiety and psychological burn-out, which ultimately result in members leaving the community.

THEORY AND METHODS

I spent a total of two months in the community – September, 2016 and January, 2017 – and have kept in touch with several members up until the present. Being a Phd student in social anthropology, I understandably picked participant observation as my data collection method. However, wanting to pay due respect to the egalitarian ethic of my hosts, which I also shared, I decided to integrate elements of the action research approach, which sees the research process is a collaborative enterprise of the researcher and the host group and aims to benefit the host group (see Whyte, 1991). I therefore shared and discussed my observations with community members during my stay and thereafter, which, I believe, not only enriched my personal perspective, but also helped the entire community engage in a process of reflexivity and self-knowledge.

I stayed in the community as a volunteer, participating in all aspect of community life, including work, meals, group meetings, decision-making, and socialization. Apart from taking field notes, recording meetings and semi-structured interviews, and reviewing the online communication of community members¹, I made sure to keep a reflexive diary, where I attempted to separate observation from interpretation, and further recorded my own reactions and experiences, as well as possible explanations thereof. The reflexive diary was not only essential in preventing me from becoming lost in my own emotions and sympathies (since I myself had long played with the idea of joining such a community), but also proved well suited to the analytical approach I was to opt for when attempting to make sense of the data.

The psychosocial approach falls back on the object relations theory formulated within the psycho-analytic tradition of Klein (1987). It views adult human behaviour as rooted in aspects of the human psyche that are formed during early infancy. The infant's relationship to the mother and other relevant objects (namely the mother's breast and later on other relevant people) is seen as the matrix upon which the adult builds models of interaction with his or her social environment. In both, infants and adults, relationships are built to satisfy certain psycho-emotional needs, including the needs for security, attachment and ego-affirmation, as well as to mitigate related subconscious fears, especially the fear of abandonment (Stapley, 2006). A failure to meet those needs results in anxiety. To avoid experiencing it, the psyche develops defence mechanisms, such as splitting, introjection, projection and projective identification.

The same mechanisms are seen to apply at the group level (Jaques, 1953; Menzies, 1960; Bion, 1961). Individuals seek group membership in order to satisfy their psycho-emotional needs and mitigate their primitive fears. The group is regarded as a collective projection of its members' needs and a space where individual anxieties can be played out into social drama, in order that individuals do not need to deal with them on their own (Stapley, 2006). The group in adult life performs the function of the mother during infancy. The mother, in interaction with the infant, creates a maternal holding environment where tension from the outside world is managed, so as to create a feeling of security. The infant is encouraged to realize itself as an independent individual, yet can always seek refuge in the feeling of psychological unity with the mother. Similarly, the group, in interaction with individual members, also creates a holding environment

1 With the knowledge and permission of community members

which is supposed to satisfy the needs for security (by providing structure to the world and managing contact with the external reality), attachment/psychological unity (by means of social bonding and group identity) and self-affirmation (through contributing to collective goals and positive group response). According to this conceptualization, motivations underlying group membership boil down to individuals unconsciously seeking to satisfy these basic needs. Failure to do so on the part of the group results in high levels of anxiety, as well as psychological defence reactions against it.

The rest of the paper demonstrates the usefulness of the above-mentioned analytical approach in making sense of the otherwise confusing data.

CASE STUDY RESULTS

Before addressing the unconscious motivations to join the community, it is useful to have an overview of those motivations which members are aware of and choose to report. What came as a surprise is that only about half of the members intended to take a socio-political stance and wanted to “help build a better world” through their participation in the community. Apart from the damage to the environment, other social criticism included the consumerist profit-oriented culture and social organization, social hierarchies and the need to conform to social norms they disagree with. The other half did not seem to have any particular socio-political views and claimed to have joined the community either by chance (“I had nothing better to do”, “I came as a volunteer but then decided to stay”) or to satisfy their social needs. A couple elaborated on the alienation they experienced in the macro-society versus the chance for intimate bonding and mutual care that community life gave them. Some admitted to practical considerations, such as the chance to lead a cheap and easy life, or even “move out of my mother's house”.

In psychosocial terms taking a socio-political stance and realizing oneself as an agent of positive change serves the need for self-affirmation (see Stapley, 2006). Seeing oneself as valuable, worthy and good is an integral part of the positive self-image that people try to maintain (see Toma and Hancock, 2013). Not having been able to become (what they deem to be) valuable members of the macro-society, community residents seek an alternative arena for doing things, and leading a life, that they consider worthy. The reasons for their inability to integrate in the macro-society are manifold and diverse – some experience psychological problems which make them unfit to perform standard social roles, especially the ones entailed by being an employee, while others are not attracted by any of the social roles that society seems to offer them – they simply don't want to fulfill any of those roles. In either case, all of the community members had not been able to find satisfying places in the macro-society and thus came to the community looking for a way to satisfy their need for self-affirmation.

Unfortunately, this particular community was not too clear on its common goal. Quite a few meetings, including “dragon dreaming” sessions, had been dedicated to formulating a vision and a mission statement, yet all that had been agreed upon remained on paper, was not reflected in the community's projects and daily affairs, and was not persuasive enough for individual members to identify with (many of them did not even know the contents of the vision and mission statement that had been last voted). I witnessed and participated in an attempt at formulating a common

goal and a direction for the community to go in. The outcome was a list of liberal values, such as individual freedom, equality, openness, tolerance, sharing, individual growth, environmental friendliness, creativity, etc. As one member neatly summarized: “We've been discussing how to do things, but not really what to do.” In fact, the actual daily activities of members included taking care of the garden, the premises, and the guest house, the last serving as a main source of income, neither of which seemed to convincingly contribute to the “betterment of society”. Instead, all activities were focused on the community's material survival, yet that was by far not the common goal that would satisfy the members' need for self-affirmation.

And, indeed, some of those who have left since my first visit said they did not believe the community was going anywhere, and did not see a point in staying there. What is more important, however, is that a majority of committed members who left somewhat quickly (after 6 to 12 months) despite their intentions to stay long-term, did so as a result of prolonged periods of psychological fatigue or “burn-out”, chronic anxiety and depression. A member who wanted to build a life in the community and lasted longer than most, 2 years, shared that the experience had been a nightmare. Another highly-appreciated proactive member left only six months after she had joined, saying that she “could not handle it psychologically”. Yet another member described the community as a “care institution without the case aspect”, referring to the numerous psychological issues experienced by members, himself included. While three members had official diagnoses - borderline personality disorder, bipolar depression, and psychotic tendencies – the others did not see themselves as psychologically unstable.

A highly likely interpretation is that community life itself triggers negative psychological reactions in its member – an explanation embraced by myself and a number of community residents. I addressed a member who repeatedly failed to fulfill his duties, inquiring about the reasons behind his behaviour. He labeled it as “the *[name of the community]* effect” and explained that “for some reason life here drains me psychologically and completely demotivates me. I feel a lot of tension for no apparent reason.” Another member acknowledged that “[e]ven if you're not crazy, a few months here will make you go crazy. Everything about this place is tension”.

From a psychosocial perspective high levels of anxiety are a natural outcome of the group failing to provide an adequate holding environment for its members. Apart from the need for self-affirmation, the group is also supposed to satisfy individual needs for security. In the early period of childhood development the mother acts as the main source of security for the child. Adults, on the other hand, derive their sense of security from the social world they inhabit, and, importantly, from the order that the group (which can be as small as the studied community and as big as society at large) imposes on reality. Order makes the world seem more understandable and predictable thus rendering it a safer place. Social groups achieve order through their social structure, values and norms. Therefore the need for order can be seen as a motivation for joining any social group. (Stapley, 2006)

When it comes to order, the studied community dramatically failed to provide a good enough holding environment and this lack was sensed by all members alike. The group did not seem to have a stable social structure or norms, with the members feeling uncertain about their social roles and expressing the need for leadership and rules yet rebelling against those who attempted

to take on leadership roles or impose the rules. The lack of structure and norms was accompanied by continuous attempts at introducing such, which is indicative of the members' need for order. Many explicitly stated that “[w]e need rules”, “[y]ou can't have a community without rules”. Despite having been agreed on with consensus, decisions regarding the social structure and rules were repeatedly violated by almost everybody. Visitors and members alike have on many occasions described community life as “chaotic”. It is precisely this “social chaos”, or lack of order, which prevents the group from fulfilling its members' need for security, thus fueling individual anxieties and the resulting psychological fatigue and burn-out.

High levels of anxiety contribute to yet another psycho-emotional need remaining unfulfilled – that of attachment or psychological unity. Members commonly verbalize it as “feeling of belonging”, which, as noted in the introduction, has been registered as core motivation for joining intentional communities in a number of studies (Kozeny, 1995; Kirby, 2003; Jones, 2011; Lockyer; 2011). Applying a psychosocial perspective, the “feeling of belonging” can be interpreted as an escape from the existential solitude, the feeling that one is alone in his or her psychological reality. Infants' greatest fear is that of being abandoned by the mother, alone in the world, which would render it highly vulnerable. The growth of the individual entails the gradual achievement of independence from the mother, yet adults also fear psychological isolation, which is especially the case in moments of insecurity when the psyche regresses to earlier modes of being. In order to mitigate this fear, people may seek attachment or psychological unity with another person or with a group (Stapley, 2006).

Members achieved the feeling of psychological unity with each other, and with the group, through semi-ritualized socialization practices called “sharings”. In one-on-one sessions, one sharing partner in a highly emotional, open and sincere state, reflects on a psycho-emotional issue he or she might, while the other partner listens and shows intense empathy, without responding, discussing or giving opinion and advice, sometimes asking questions as a way to stimulate the reflective process. In a sharing circle the group takes on the role of an empathizing listener and only the person holding an especially designated stick is allowed to talk, which could last from a couple of minutes to half an hour, without being interrupted by anyone. As the stick goes around the circle, each member gets a chance to share, yet does not respond to anything he or she has heard. People often cry during sharing sessions, admitting traumatizing experiences and deep-seated fears, demonstrating complete openness and vulnerability. Sharings often end with long emotionally-loaded hugs. I have personally experienced sharings as acts of highly intimate bonding, giving a strong sense of togetherness. Members have also exclaimed: “I have never felt so much love and support in my life”; “I feel I have a family here”; “It's the one place I can truly open up”.

If I had visited the place only for a short period which had happened to be one of intense sharing, I would have been left with the impression that members enjoyed a feeling of complete unity and belonging. Yet in-between such episodes, there are quite long and psychologically draining periods of group disintegration and individual isolation. They are marked by high level of personal conflicts and a general atmosphere of tension. In such a social environment group members close themselves off in an act of self-defence, limit contact with each other only to the extent that their work requires it, and generally behave as if a group bond did not exist. People who might have previously appreciated the love and family bond, also felt that: “We are a pack of

lone wolves”; “I feel I am alone”; “Nobody cares”. Such feelings and perceptions are indicative of a severely unfulfilled need for attachment.

The tension within the group and the resulting group disintegration can be attributed to the increased levels of individual anxiety generated by the lack of structure (i.e. unfulfilled need for security), as well as the lack of a shared goal (interfering with the need for self-affirmation). However, Lawrence et. al's (1996) investigation of the “Me-ness” group state suggests the possibility of an opposite causal link – it may be because a group bond does not exist that the group is incapable of uniting around a common goal and maintaining internal structure and norms. However, such interpretation would fail to account for the periods of intense bonding in the studied community. Hopper (2001) formulates a model, which explains alternating group states of disintegration (which he calls “aggregation”) and psychological unity (“massification”), like the ones experienced by the community under study, as resulting from fear of annihilation and fear of separation. The latter are said to be most prominent in traumatized groups and groups composed of traumatized individuals. Whether this is indeed the case in the studied community is a matter of further investigation. The current analysis is limited to demonstrating that the choice for community membership is influenced by psychological motivations that members are not always aware of.

CONCLUSION

The paper described three group-level phenomena in an intentional community of the ecological-type - lack of shared goal, lack of structure and norms, and periods of group disintegration. I have thus far argued that all three are interrelated parts of a process which is rooted in the psychological needs that members unconsciously seek to fulfill when joining the community. The failure of the group to meet those needs has resulted in many members experiencing negative reactions, such as chronic anxiety and depression, psychological fatigue and burn-out, which has led them to leave the community sooner than intended. The overall impact on the community has been an atmosphere of tension and unstable membership, among other things.

The value of exploring motivations for membership from a psychosocial perspective is twofold. Firstly, it provides a deeper understanding of intentional communities as a social phenomenon and the reasons for their existence. Secondly, it can serve as a starting point for the studied community to reflect on their problems and look for ways to overcome them.

The fact that academic research on intentional communities of the ecological type is often undertaken by researchers who empathize with the broader social movement could mean that the positive aspects of this phenomenon might have been overemphasized. They are often presented as projects for environmental sustainability and a more just social alternative to the modern world. While this might very well be the case, it does not exclude a more pessimistic perspective which sees the rise in the number of intentional communities as a symptom of the failure of modern societies to provide meaning and structure to their members.

While ecologically-oriented communities attract people from various backgrounds, educated middle-class young adults tend to be over-represented (see Wurfel, 2014). Strictly speaking, it is

these members of Western societies that have a choice with regard to the social roles they may chose to fulfill in order to become productive members of society. At the same time, an increasing number of them fail to identify with any of the available social roles and seek alternative realities, where identities are formed in a relative isolation from the macro-society. However, as people form communities or join existing ones, they bring along their psycho-emotional realities that were formed in the macro-society. As the current paper has demonstrated, these realities may be marked by unfulfilled psychological needs, accompanied by increased levels of anxiety, which get projected into the group life of the community. Needless to say, the extent of this phenomenon can only be evaluated through research in other communities, preferably carried out by researchers who have no or are aware of their biases.

The last statement is as much a general one, as one addressing my own self. Having participated in ecological community projects, I initially approached my research with the aim of exploring a promising social alternative to modern existence. I felt myself being drawn to community life with its sense of a social mission and falling in the trap of overly-optimistic interpretation. Owing to intense reflexivity and discussions with an unbiased outsider (my PhD supervisor), I managed to achieve a more critical perspective. Yet, as a result of my personal disillusionment, I might have gone too far the other way and over-emphasized the problematic aspects of community life. I ask that readers approach my research findings in light of this risk.

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