

Individuality in Community

at the EcoVillage at Ithaca



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Abstract:

The purpose of this thesis is to capture the lives of my friends and informants at EcoVillage at Ithaca (EVI), an intentional community in the state of New York, USA - where I conducted ethnographic field research from the 30th of December 2010 through March 29th 2011 - as they attempt to define and balance the ideals of unity and individuality, in their journey toward establishing a shared culture within an inclusive and supportive environment for all.

One might ask: What is the main dilemma the community faces in this regard? Is too much individualism getting in the way of forming a cohesive community, able to work toward common goals and reach for a shared vision; or is too big a drive toward communitarianism overshadowing the personal expression of, and understanding for, individual differences that inevitably exist within a community?

Through extensive participant observation, and personal interactions with various EcoVillagers, I can only conclude that it seems to be both and neither, under varying circumstances, for different individuals, and at different times in the community. In this thesis, I will give voice to both sides of the dilemma - the hardships that come with being different in a close community, as well as the struggle to overcome individualistic mind-sets and form a cohesive community - in an effort to provide insight into the central question:

How is the balance between a deep respect for individuality, while living together as a community, striving toward a common vision, conceptualized and maintained?

This tension, present in the EcoVillage at Ithaca can be linked to the central themes of individuality and importance of community in U.S. society. Individuality and diversity are frequently 'celebrated' in U.S. society, but problematized by some or in some cases. Likewise, strong sense of community is often experienced as empowering, but can also become a restrictive experience for others or in other cases. Why, how and when do these tensions arise? The clash between the shared ideals of individuality and community will first be explored in the context of American society, followed by recollections of specific instances in the EcoVillage community that mirror the theoretical discourse.

In conclusion, I aim to show the EcoVillage's (potential) evolution toward a community in which a shared respect for individual differences (in needs, perspectives, life style choices, etc.), bind the EcoVillagers together in their collective effort to model a social and environmentally sustainable community. A place where unity in diversity is possible and empowering.

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Thank you to all the participants who very willingly contributed their ‘voice’ in focus groups, interviews, and conversations, made me feel at home, included, and respected at the EcoVillage, expressed an interest in, and supported my research efforts.

I especially want to recognize and thank Fred, for initiating ‘the bumper sticker’ discussion (featured on p. 41). That was genius! I could not have come up with a better, more creative, way to basically ask people: “describe what EcoVillage represents to you, and the image you want [us] to present to the outside world, in one sentence.” This is just one example of the ways in which specific individuals in the community contributed to and (unintentionally) shaped and influenced my research. There are many more, and I hope that you will recognize your positive influence on specific sections and paragraphs, or throughout this thesis and know that I am *very* thankful to each and every one of you for all the inspiration.

I am moreover extremely grateful for all of the wonderful people I have met during my time at the EcoVillage in Ithaca and afterwards - at the Landelijke Vereniging Centraal Wonen bijeenkomst/national intentional communities conference, for instance, and all the participants and professors of the CEU summer school course on Mediation in Budapest, as well as fellow masters students at the VU, particularly the discussant of this thesis, Hendrine Stelwagen – who all expressed a genuine interest in this thesis (topic). Your enthusiasm was contagious, frequently restoring the necessary motivation during the writing process.

A note on names: I changed all of the respondents’ names, even in cases where I could not make it less obvious who a particular pseudonym is referring to, and even though many of you indicated that this would not be necessary, and were perfectly fine with ‘claiming your statements’ in many cases. This transparency of opinions is admirable, but reporting respondents’ real names, in any case, remains unethical – and therefore I have refrained from doing so.

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Individuality and Community at the EcoVillage at Ithaca

How can one capture the many different voices, opinions, perspectives and experiences concerning life at EcoVillage in one coherent and cohesive story, without reducing the significance of any of the varying perspectives? As I pondered this question, I realized that the community members are, in fact, facing the same obstacle: So many different individuals aiming to form one unified community. How is the balance between a deep respect for individuality, while living together as a community, striving toward a common vision, conceptualized and experienced?

Notably, this main tension is present in U.S. society as well. Individualism is often seen as a defining characteristic of U.S. society and (respect for) diversity is promoted and ‘celebrated’ in many institutional settings. ‘Community’ is likewise idealized, and unity is often expressed as a desired goal, for the nation or the ‘national community,’ as well as many communities that make up the nation.

How has the balance between these shared – divergent or conflicting – ideals been defined? What specific tensions arise in the attempt to form cohesive, unified, empowered, yet inclusive communities that acknowledge and respect “the distinctiveness and differences of particular groups [or individuals] that constitute the larger whole?” (Alperson 2002, p. 2). After describing this dilemma, as it applies to U.S. society, in a theory chapter, I will zoom in on the EcoVillage and present scenarios and accounts in which similar tensions have been expressed.

A nation [or community] that brings people together, creating a ‘we’ but which enables these same persons to [be] themselves and recognize one another in and through their differences as well as what they share in common – this...is the great challenge (Elsthain & Beem 2002, p. 37).

EcoVillage at Ithaca –the setting

EcoVillage at Ithaca (EVI), located on 175 acres, two miles from downtown Ithaca, and three miles from Cornell University and Ithaca College, was established in 1996 and is now made up of two separate but closely connected neighborhoods (FRoG – first residential group, and SoNG – second neighborhood group), with a third neighborhood, TREE – Third Residential Ecovillage Experience, about to begin construction. It is the first co-housing community in the world to have more than one neighborhood (Chitewere 2006, p. 303).

EVI is an intentional community based on the co-housing model, in which

families live in their own homes but within very close proximity to their neighbors—unlike most standard homes in the U.S., which reflect the dominant cultural values of independence and privacy. At EcoVillage, the residents share certain spaces and facilities such as a laundry room and a large kitchen and dining areas in the two common houses, where community meals are held up to four times a week. Some costs - such as a monthly maintenance bill, allowing one to use the laundry facilities and common spaces at no extra cost -are shared. Income is not shared.

Furthermore, the community is an *eco-village*. the architectural and physical design, layout and features of the homes and community advance the Ecovillagers' goal to exemplify a 'new' way to live optimally and sustainably on the planet and with each other, by reducing (energy) consumption while encouraging social interaction, in recognition of the fact that “the way Americans have been living for years – the lack of social interaction and mutual support from neighbors, and the constant wastefulness and inefficiencies –isn't healthy for individuals or the planet,” as many Ecovillagers would express.

Thus the homes were designed with big south facing windows so as to “take full advantage of passive solar energy” (Chitewere 2006, p. 118). The walls of the duplexes are super insulated for minimum heat loss in winter, and houses share hot water and heating facilities, which further increases efficiency (Kirby 2004, p. 82).

The homes, particularly in Frog, are clustered close together with a narrow (but wide enough for easy wheelchair access) path between them and share one wall. All homes at Ecovillage are duplexes. The individual homes are situated with the kitchen facing the main path and big windows providing optimum visibility of neighbors walking by.

During my first day at Ecovillage, I was invited over for breakfast in one of the homes in Frog. As we were talking about my research and enjoying home-made muffins, a neighbor was sighted heading back to her house. “Here comes Karen, Let me introduce you to Karen...” Karen was invited in and joined the conversation. These simple 'cohousing moments' of spontaneous but meaningful interaction have been described by many Ecovillagers as contributing to their sense of belonging to and appreciation for the community.

The Second neighborhood (Song) is different. These houses were individually designed by residents. Whereas in Frog, the homes are almost exactly alike,

particularly from the outside, (“cookie cutter homes”) and there is no distinction, in Song, you can kind of tell who had more money to create a fancier home. (although nothing really ostentatious). The Song neighborhood seems much more individualistic, both in appearance and character. People in the village have noticed and commented on this too.

Moreover, the fact that the residents of Song were able to, and spend so much time, designing and building their own home seems to have started them off on a very different path than their fore-runners in Frog. ‘Songs’ were busy with their own designs and the implementation of these plans, and there was little time leftover to interact with neighbors. Once the homes were finally built, they were “pretty much pooped-out,” and retreated to the quiet shelter of their own home, or so I’ve been told. Song never became quite as interactive or socially cohesive as Frog.

I was only in a Frog home for two consecutive days (though I did visit more regularly for shorter periods of time) – dog sitting, and I immediately noticed a difference between life at Frog vs. life at Song; a very different neighborhood feeling. People ‘popping in’ to borrow or return the car keys, or use the bathroom scale to weigh themselves, waving hello to neighbors, from the kitchen window, as they walk by, etc. Song homes, on the other hand, are spaced much further away from the main path between them, so you don’t see your neighbors walking by as easily, and they can’t peer into your home. (“I like that about Song though. I need my space.” *Rebecca*).

For some, it is a relief that within EcoVillage, you have the option of living in a closer community, such as Frog, or a neighborhood with a little more space and privacy, such as Song. Individuals do not all have to have the same vision about, or comfort level with, ‘community,’ in order to become a part of EcoVillage. However, this lack of homogeneity among EcoVillagers may have its downsides too- a point that will be further illuminated throughout this thesis.

What exactly is the central problem the community faces in its endeavor to establish a shared culture within an inclusive and supportive environment for all?

- Is too much individualism getting in the way forming a cohesive community, able to work toward common goals and reach for a shared vision?

- Or is too big a drive toward communitarianism overshadowing the personal expression of, and understanding for, certain differences that inevitably exist within a community?

It seems to be both and neither, under varying circumstances, for different individuals, and at different times in the community. In this thesis I want to present both voices, both sides to the issue: The hard-ships that come with being different in a close community, as well as the struggle to overcome individualistic mind-sets, and form a cohesive community.

Let me begin by briefly introducing...

“The people...”

...is often the short answer given to the question: “what has been the most rewarding, and the most challenge experience for you, living at Ecovillage?”

The EcoVillagers at Ithaca found their way to this intentional community, from various states in the US (though California and New York seem to be the major contributors), and different continents: England, Japan, Vietnam, Brazil, India, and Trinidad – from rural, urban, or suburban settings.

They have come to EcoVillage for various reasons: Some are very radical in their beliefs and efforts “to work toward a more sustainable future”, and had hoped that EcoVillage would allow them to live out that mission together with like-minded and similarly motivated individuals, others came mainly to experience a “sense of community” and deeper connection with their neighbors, which they missed in their previous neighborhoods, while some are not ashamed to admit that they basically were looking for a nice place to raise their kids, and this seemed to be it.

What unites these EcoVillagers? Is one of the questions that will be explored further in this thesis, starting in chapter three, which deals with questions such as:

- *How is a ‘shared’ vision defined? And how is the collective effort toward this vision experienced?*

While “the people” offer the biggest source of inspiration to each other, and living together in one community, with relatively like-minded, yet diverse, individuals is often seen as the most rewarding aspect of life at EcoVillage, living with all sorts of different people in one community, can, at times, also becoming frustrating, tricky

and a source of tension due to disagreements, misunderstandings, and conflicting priorities, needs, values, and opinions.

- *How are individual differences experienced?* Is the theme of chapter four.

Structure of thesis

After further describing the setting, followed by a description of methodology used in my research, this study will be placed in the context of the shared ideologies, or competing discourses, of ‘individualism’ and ‘community’ in U.S. society – in a theoretical chapter.

The next chapter will focus on issues regarding defining a shared vision for the community, and the ways in which the collective effort toward this vision is experienced at the Ecovillage.

Chapter 4 continues with the ways in which differences, and issues of diversity are experienced and integrated within EcoVillage.

In conclusion, I aim to present the Village’s (potential) evolution toward a community in which a shared respect for individual differences (in needs, perspectives, life style choices, etc.), binds the EcoVillagers together in their collective effort to model a social and environmentally sustainable community; a place where ‘unity in diversity’ is possible and empowering.

But first I shall define and clarify specific terms I will be using throughout this thesis. What do I mean by, and what is the relationship between ‘diversity,’ ‘differences’ and ‘individuality?’

Bell and Hartmann’s (2007) article ‘Diversity in Everyday Discourse’ claims that the common, American, usage of the term ‘diversity’ refers almost solely to racial or ethnic diversity. The common discourse of ‘celebrating diversity’ moreover lacks a general understanding of or willingness to consider issues of inclusion and equality between ‘differences’ (p. 911). In his article ‘Diversity versus Difference’ Erikson (2006) distinguishes between ‘diversity,’ and the way it is commonly understood or applied and the much broader and more problematic concept of ‘difference.’

In this thesis I will be using broader definition of ‘diversity,’ which includes elements more commonly understood as ‘differences.’ The differences I will describe in this thesis include: differing needs, opinions, choices, interpretations, motivations,

as well as different categories of age, gender, (dis)ability, and 'status' (e.g. long term resident vs. newer arrivals; settled home-owners vs. more transient renters) in the community. Sometimes I will be using the term 'diversity' when referring to these different categories (e.g. 'age diversity'), or the presence of differences in the community. Individuality, in my opinion, constitutes the free expression of differences. 'Respect for individuality' thus implies a level of comfort with differences.

Regional Background and Setting

Ithaca

“10 square miles of Utopia surrounded by reality.”

The EcoVillagers describe Ithaca –a college town, home to Cornell University, Ithaca College, Empire state College for adult education, and Tompkins Cortland Community College near by- as a very progressive city, like Portland, Oregon or Boulder Colorado, but unique in its small-scale.

Mother Earth News picked up on the prevalent sustainability culture in Ithaca, and ranked this destination as its number one of the “12 Great Places You’ve Never Heard of”, in 2006: “With the amenities of a much larger city, the scenery of a much smaller one and an active and progressive citizenry, Ithaca shines as a model of a unique and sustainable place to live” (Byczynski 2006, p.4).

In her book, *Choosing a Sustainable Future: Ideas and Inspirations from Ithaca, NY*, Liz Walker (2010), co-founder and resident of Ecovillage, describes how the city of Ithaca has “embraced the sustainability revolution with incredible enthusiasm...

Choosing a Sustainable Future explores all aspects of the city’s emerging green culture... a fascinating world of creative and successful endeavors based on cooperation, local production, environmental stewardship and social justice... These remarkable examples of citizen engagement are a taste of what life should be like in a sustainable community of tomorrow. Each project embodies a conscious commitment to realizing a vision of a more resilient community and a better world. In times of overwhelming economic, social and environmental crises, *choosing a sustainable future* offers a quite, authoritative voice of hope.” (Back cover).

In this book, Walker (2010) introduces the EcoVillage, but also acknowledges other “creative endeavors” toward sustainability underway in Ithaca, New York.

Ithaca is thus in no way an obscure location for an EcoVillage, and “just might be a utopia for the eco-minded” (Byczynski 2006, p.1). In fact, according to *Mother Earth News* reporter, Lynn Byczynski: “[Ithaca’s] environmental ethic is evident in the success of EcoVillage, a co-housing community in which 90 percent of the

community's 176 acres is preserved as open space. Residents live in passive solar homes and share ownership of many things," (Byczynski 2006, p.2).

However, EcoVillage's relation to other residents of the city of Ithaca is less idealistic than the statement from Mother Earth News may lead one to believe. One might think that Ithacans would be proud of a place like EcoVillage on its soil. However, talking to 'outsiders' – primarily after church, synagogue, or other outside events I attended - and listening to EcoVillagers express the way they've heard other Ithacans talk about them, this was not the general impression I got. While the EcoVillage attracts many visitors who obviously admire the place and its potential, some form of resentment can also be felt from other Ithacans – as can be gleaned from terms like "egovillage", and "an exclusive settlement on the hill."

As mentioned, EcoVillagers are aware of these stereotypes they unfortunately exude. Some are actively thinking about ways to avoid be(come)ing, a kind of isolated community on a hill, and encourage processes of mutual learning and respect from other communities in Ithaca. But the majority of EcoVillagers do not seem as concerned or motivated toward such actions.

The village

The neighborhoods, Frog and Song, consist of 30 housing units and one Common House (CH) each. Each Common House includes a spacious cooking and dining area, dish room, laundry facilities, storage areas, guest rooms, a children's play room including a play house, books and toys in Frog, and a games room with a pool table and another collection of children's books and toys in Song. The Frog CH has a comfy sitting corner adjacent to the dining space – with couches and pull-down screen and overhead projector – for Friday night movies and the like.

The Song sitting room is separated from the dining area by glass doors (which may be closed to preserve quiet and privacy, for example, during meetings, when other EcoVillagers or children may be using the adjacent common/dining area). This sitting room also includes a library from which EcoVillagers may borrow, or donate books. The Song Common house moreover has a ping pong table.

The Frog common house moreover includes a teen room, a multipurpose room (a.k.a 'the mat' room where yoga classes and other activities may be held), the re-use room, and private offices. Villagers from both neighborhoods can make use of either

common house and the amenities it provides.

The community is “age-diverse, from toddlers to octogenarians, and includes singles, families, retirees, and students. Among these are homemakers, educators, health professionals, scientists, engineers, and more” (EcovillageatIthaca.org, Frog Neighborhood). Song is moreover described as diverse “in terms of religion, diet, and gender choices, [and] our neighborhood has both the smallest and largest home in EcoVillage.” However, they admit to desiring “a more homey, settled feeling, like Frog” (EcovillageatIthaca.org, Song). EVI includes a variety of one, two, three, or four bedroom homes, with a number of homes offering rooms for rent. The total population at EcoVillage consists of about 160 men women and children and 10 renters.

Social Life: organization, and participation at EVI

Optional common house meals can be enjoyed up to three times a week for residents of each neighborhood (at a small charge per meal). Meals occur in the Frog common house on Monday and Tuesday evenings - Monday being a Village meal, and Tuesday’s for the Frog neighborhood only; Wednesday and Thursday at Song, Wednesday being the Song neighborhood meal, and Thursdays for the whole Village.

There are several members on the cook team, and they take turns ‘head-cooking’ and being assistant cooks for Neighborhood and Village meals. Some villagers always cook on specific days of the week –but mostly, the cooks vary per day and per week. There is not enough regularity to ensure that a meal will be served at the CH each and every Monday – Thursday. “Signing up” to head – or assist cook a meal on a particular day occurs through the EcoVillage wiki, and can be done months in advance, but is usually done closer to the actual date. Sometimes, head-cooks have to send out an email to the village for volunteers if not enough assistants signed up on the wiki, or one or two had to cancel. And sometimes meals are cancelled -this generally only happens if there was no head-cook to begin with.

Participation in village and neighborhood meals varies. Some residents attend all the meals available, many attend at least once a week, and some don’t or very rarely attend. This minimal attendance on the part of some residents can be for various reasons: very specific dietary restrictions and needs that the community cooks cannot be expected to cater to all the time, children who are “picky eaters” or get over

stimulated by the crowd and the noise level at common house meals, or families who feel like they do not get to spend enough time together “as a family” during the day and would rather not be separated at meal times too. (Kids generally dine at their own, separate table). Participation at common house meals is in no way required, and lack thereof is generally not frowned upon, as long as the person or family is known to participate in at least some other areas of the community life.

Besides common meals, I have experienced plenty of social events, and taken part in various chores, such as: Weekly movie nights, neighborhood meetings, village meetings, Tree meetings, committee meetings, the cook-team, Decisions Team, dish-crew, tea parties, birthday parties, New Years parties, religious celebrations, writers circles, drum circles, prayer circles, meditation, yoga, Ping-Pong tournament, poker games, board games. Of course, no one participates in each and every one of these events (except me). These events are organized by different members of the village – whoever feels inspired and is willing to organize – and attended by whoever feels drawn. Usually, between three-seven Villagers show up, while the annual Ping Pong Tournament, the Prayer Circle for Japan, and the showing of the film *The Economics of Happiness* (which will be described in chapter three) drew a significantly bigger crowd.

There are, moreover, regular neighborhood meetings and village wide meetings – which also not everyone attends (anymore) for various reasons: feeling “fed up” with meetings after having lived at EVI for many years, “dislike of the atmosphere at meetings,” or uncertainty about “whether I (as a renter) have anything to contribute. Whether my opinions would be appreciated. Do I have a voice here? I don’t know.” Several of the renters I spoke with expressed similar feelings – of being somewhat of “an outsider” in the community -as if those who purchased a home were somehow more ‘real’ members of EcoVillage. More about this particular tension, and the way different people, of different statuses, are perceived and incorporated in the community, will be presented in chapter four.

Personal reflections by the researcher: on participation

For me, it has been a privilege to get to know such vastly different people, in such a relatively small amount of time and space. I know many people in the community express similar sentiments -about learning from each other, and living at Ecovillage

being an enriching and rewarding experience in that way. However “the people” and having to deal with so many differences is simultaneously named as one of the most difficult parts of living at EcoVillage.

As a participant observer, not plagued with insider biases, I must have had a specific advantage when it comes to ‘dealing with difference’ over others in the community, who were perhaps more tied to their own agendas, mostly in terms of time/scheduling - not enough time to explore all the diversity, get to know neighbors and personally learn from each others’ differences – as well as in terms of holding personal goals, ideals, and visions about EcoVillage.

I had time to participate in almost all social events and was able to listen to many different people expressing their opinions or viewpoints on certain issues. I gained people’s trust and they felt free to talk to me about issues they may not feel as comfortable with, or have gotten tired of, sharing with their neighbors at EcoVillage. I was able to hear concerns and honest feelings being expressed, without the burden of having to formulate my own opinions on the matter, sit through contentious meetings, or participate in endless attempts to reach consensus.

Being there for only three months was a perfect amount of time to experience many different angles and not get stuck in one niche or clique within the community. Those who live there longer lose that privilege, I imagine. When you get caught up in decision making – having to have a say in what you find important -prioritizing your values and how you spend your time in the community – with whom you wish to associate more, etc. I did not quite make it to that point yet. I was free to maneuver: Between the young parents, the singles, and the retired grandparents; associate closely with people of, and develop a personal interest in, all the different faiths and religious beliefs, or lack-there-of, hear different, and sometimes conflicting sides to a story... In other words, truly experience the diversity that exists at Ecovillage, I guess partly, at times, as an obstacle to overcome or work through (how am I going to represent all of these different perspective in one cohesive, conclusive, thesis?) but mostly as an enrichment adventure, and opportunity for personal growth.

The Village and its Anthropologist

(Methodology)

Participant Observation

Participant observation constitutes the core elements of ethnographic research (Herbert 2000, p. 551). “In participating as fully and humanly as possible in another way of life, the ethnographer learns what is required to become a member, to experience events and meanings in ways that approximate *members’* experiences” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 1995, p. 2), to “grasp what they experience as meaningful and important” (ibid. p. 2), be able to ask relevant questions, engage in rapport, and overall facilitate the research process.

“At the common house, where meals are served every Monday-Thursday evening, I also hope to engage in many informal conversations. I will offer to help prepare dinner regularly, as I assume the shared task of cooking will provide a conducive context for conversation. Helping out will moreover serve as a form of reciprocation” (My research proposal, VU 2010).

Initiating conversation was not as easy and did not always go as smoothly as I had envisioned. Not infrequently, however, people opened up to me, and started sharing many relevant personal perspectives and experiences about (their lives at) EcoVillage after minimal prompting from me. I am very thankful for those moments, because, at times, I felt a bit uneasy, and somehow guilty about ‘bothering’ people with my questions. The reasons for this intuitive feeling became clearer later on.

On ‘being studied’

During my last week at EcoVillage I attended a Cook Team meeting, during which the tension between respecting/cooperating with the educational mission, and securing a personal sense of privacy was clearly articulated and discussed. The meeting was held after a community meal, in the sitting room area of the Frog Common house, while one or two tables in the main dining area remained occupied by friends carrying on a deeper conversation after the dinner-time din, and the Monday night Dish Crew was rinsing dishes and loading them into the dishwasher in the dish room.

As I sat, listening to what was being discussed by the Cook Team, I kept looking around, wondering what other conversations and social activities I could be missing out on. Wasn’t tonight games night? Were the people that were lingering

behind in the dining area perhaps waiting for me to join them? (I had talked to them about staying for games night, but joined this meeting, wondering if games night was still on, when no one showed up with games). And who was on the dish crew tonight? That person I still wanted to talk to about some specific question before I 'leave the field?' The topics discussed by the Cook Team seemed to be not particularly relevant (assigning tasks: who's going to buy what for the Common House meals, how/when will they get reimbursed, concerns about things going missing, being borrowed and never returned, or being misplaced, etc.). But then someone raised a personal concern, about guests or visitors being signed up to join a common house meal, and ending up sitting by themselves. The concern was not so much about that experience for the visitor, but:

It just makes me feel uneasy to see them sitting there by themselves. I feel like I'm somehow responsible for entertaining them. But then I don't feel like joining them, because after a long-days work, I'm just looking forward to catching up with my friends, over dinner. Sometimes they'll just come to your table, with their plate of food, and ask if they can join you, and you don't want to turn them down, so its like 'sure, go ahead.' And then you can't have a normal conversation with friends anymore, because you end up answering all these questions that visitors ask, like: "So where are you from? How long have you been living here? What made you decide to move to EcoVillage?" *Vicky.*

Cringe! Those were my standard questions, when I first began my research. I laughed along with the rest of the group, feeling like an insider – because they were able to talk so openly about these concerns with me, the researcher, who does tend to ask those questions, right there. Others in the group also reassured me "this is not about you Mirjam. No, you're one of us."

"And then when they (the visitors/guests) want to help out in the kitchen, and you get these unexpected helpers all of a sudden. It just creates more stress for the head cook," Roxanne added.

"What makes its extra complicated is that you know your regular cooks, and what they're good at...So not only do you have to switch around the tasks you were planning to assign to each person, but also figure out what the guests is capable of."

Patricia confirmed

Vicky: " Sometimes you've got to say: 'We don't need your help right now.'" I usually showed up announced, which, I think, was sometimes truly appreciated but indeed not always. I made sure I always had something to read or do at the Common House, in case my help was not needed.

“Some visitors are just so eager to help...” Patricia continued
“...gives them a good opportunity to ask their little questions too!” Roxanne laughed.
(They see right through me!)

While I had expected that ‘the shared task of cooking’ would be a ‘conducive context for conversations’ to take place, and it was, on some occasions, I also sometimes felt that it was not *my* place to ask questions or initiate conversations. But after being a part of that particular meeting - and hearing the insiders’ perspective on what it feels like to be studied – I feel good about the fact that I have mostly been more of a thoughtful observer and attentive listener than an inquisitive participant with an agenda.

Before the close of the meeting, the facilitator asked: “Have we covered everything? Any burning questions we need to address before we close this meeting?” Someone joked: “How long have you been living here? Where did you come from, and what made you decide to move to EcoVillage?” We all left the room laughing in recognition of those questions.

I knew EcoVillage had attracted several student researchers in the past, and quite a bit of media attention. I did not realize it was quite so popular! People get fed up with “feeling like I’m in a fish-bowl.” They knew, before moving here, that *education* was part of the mission of EcoVillage, but were not prepared for what that would entail. “We’re just normal people, and sometimes we just want to be left alone to lead our own lives!”¹ And they would rather be talking to friends than answering questions from intrigued strangers. For some, it makes them feel uncomfortable and violated when strangers (e.g. participants in Village tours) whip out their cameras and start taking pictures of them, their children, and their homes.

I have witnessed organized tours of EcoVillage, which happen every last Saturday of the month and draw quite a crowd, as well as groups of college students coming to learn about the initiatives at EcoVillage as part of a course in architecture, environmental studies, anthropology, etc., guests who stay at one of the Bed and Breakfast at EcoVillage, and other guests who are interested in EcoVillages, and through connections, reserved a place at one of the community meals. They say the

¹ This was a sentiment expressed during a conversation between Ecovillagers amongst themselves, while I sat at their table; not a statement made directly to me in response to my questions.

amount of visitors and guests is even greater in summer, but even in this season, I got used to not being the only non-resident around and being asked questions from guests as though I were a true part of EcoVillage (the Village and its Anthropologist). The first few times it happened I would often say “I don’t know, I’m a guest here myself.” But by the end of my stay, I had quite a story to tell!

Email and document analysis: email forms a vital part in the lives of EcoVillagers. Through the ‘list-serve’ one gets informed about and invited to social events and activities, is kept up to date about proposed changes or issues under discussion, requests (e.g. to borrow something, or a ride to town) appear, questions are posed, suggestions are given, used, no longer, or unwanted items are offered, interesting (online) newspaper or magazine articles are shared and announcements are made. Being connected to the list-serve has facilitated my research by making me aware of the various social activities going on, which I could then join, providing me with relevant documents e.g. meeting minutes, and enabling me to analyze the kind of news and media items that captivate EcoVillagers, and the issues raised and topics discussed “behind the scenes” (behind the computer screens).

Toward the end of my research, I started posing a “question of the day” per email, which always generated a few responses. Questions included: Do you feel like you are a part of something significant here at EcoVillage? What constitutes “the good life?” What values drew you to EcoVillage? Have you found what you were expecting or hoping to find?

Interviews: EcoVillage is a community of people who are “used to being studied,” my co-supervisor and EcoVillage resident, Richard Franke, informed me. Indeed, several people asked me “will you be interviewing people while you are here?” or “Have you started interviewing yet?” and then volunteered to be interviewed. Others I recruited by asking them personally, usually after I had gotten to know them a bit through informal conversations and interactions. In total I held 19 different interviews (the first two of which I would consider ‘trial’ interviews) – with people from both neighborhoods, both genders, from those who’d been living here since the very beginning of EcoVillage, to new members who had moved in a few months prior to

my arrival (and anywhere in between), from young singles to grandparent, ex-hippies and peace-activists to retired Ministry of Defense employees.

Several people reported to me after the interview that I asked good questions, which made them curious to see the results of my research. A couple of people even said they enjoyed the interview and thanked me sincerely for giving them the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and talk about certain issues to an interested and unbiased listener.

The interviews started with some opening questions in the form of background information: Where did you live before you came here, what made you decide to move to EcoVillage, in what year, etc., and probing attitudes toward ‘mainstream’ society or (cultural) differences between EVI and outside communities. “How would you compare life at EVI to what you were used to in other neighborhoods?”

The next set of questions involved peoples’ involvement in the community; asking about attendance at common house meals (how often and why/what do you like about them?), participation in ‘community labor,’ informal socializing in the community and outside, attendance at meetings etc. Note: some of these questions I stopped asking about, and just observed. It becomes clear who attends certain activities regularly and who shows up less often. The responses to “what do you like about common house meals” generally covered three basic categories: good food (healthy, nutritious, delicious, nice variety), good people (enjoy the social aspect of eating together) good price (“very affordable for a top quality meal - beats any restaurant”), with a different emphasis on one or two of these aspects.

The people I spoke to were positive about the work requirements at EVI: “It allows each person to do what they do best and enjoy doing, and you let others take care of things that you might personally not be so good at, but suits them better” – e.g. laundry machine repair, facilitating meetings, structural maintenance of common house, cooking for the village (one head cook + two or three assistants), Dish Crew after the meal, etc. Both neighborhoods have public sign up sheets with the tasks and the names of those who are responsible for them, and how many times per week they are supposed to do them. No sanctions are involved for not (sufficiently) contributing labor to the community, but according to some, “some implicit public pressure is exerted on those who do not perform any community work.” However, no one “keeps tabs” to see how much work each person is actually doing. The 2-4 hours a week of

volunteer labor in the community seems to be not so much required as it is kindly requested.

Often, I would let people talk about participation in the community first (an easy topic), to set a comfortable tone for the next set of questions; dealing with differences in the community:

“Do you know of/were you involved in any conflicting/divisive issues at EVI?” -What was that like? - Did you feel like your (or everyone’s) voice was being heard and your/(their) concerns sufficiently (equally)considered? – Which kinds of arguments or concerns tend to receive priority when there is a conflict? –What values are decisions ultimately based on?

Most of the time, I hardly had to use all these probes. Everyone had a story to tell that would flow freely. I had thought it would be difficult to approach these subjects, but EcoVillagers are used to talking about conflicts: “We do this all the time.”

Sometimes, they found it easier to divulge personal opinions and sentiments to me, an outsider, than to their neighbors in the community.

Toward the end of the interview, I had some miscellaneous questions, including:

“How would you describe a typical EcoVillager?” - “Would you describe yourself as a typical EcoVillager?” - “in which way would you consider yourself different or unique from the ‘average’ EcoVillager, or the majority here?” - “Would you appreciate it if people expressed more of an interest in this particular aspect of your life?”

This first question typically got a few laughs: “There is no such thing as a *typical* EcoVillager! We are all so different.” But several communalities were listed. Whether or not they could describe one ‘typical’ EcoVillager, many of the respondents would not stamp that label on themselves and a number admitted they would appreciate it if their unique characteristics or qualities were recognized a little more within the community. Although, overall, a respect for individuality and differences does seem to be a commonly held value, as one will see in the chapters that follow. First however, I would like to introduce the dominant ideologies of individuality, as well as community, in U.S. society as a whole, before zooming in on the case example of EcoVillage at Ithaca

THEORY

Community and 'Individuality' in U.S. society.

“For a long time our society was held together, even in periods of rapid change, by a largely liberal protestant center that sought to reconcile the claims of community and individuality[...]that task has become increasingly difficult...but it has by no means been abandoned” (Bellah 1996, p. 155).

What I hope to elucidate in this chapter is the ways in which the tension between individuality and unity is played out in U.S. society, or the ‘national community,’ just as, as will be revealed throughout this thesis, it exists in the small-scale community of the Ecovillage at Ithaca. I will begin by first describing the ideals and discourse of individuality and community separately; starting with a section describing the significance, history and current discourse of individuality in U.S. society; followed by a section in which I will present the perceived importance, a brief history of movements toward, and current discourse of community in U.S. society.

Subsequently, I will present a discussion of the inevitable tension between these (seemingly) disparate ideologies, as defined by ‘communitarian’ philosophies, and others who believe in the power of unified communities as agents of social change.

I shall conclude with hopeful interpretations of inclusive communities - citing scholars such as Walker (1998), Bellah (1995), and Stevenson (2002), - and visions of the skillful integration of individuality in community, or unity in diversity.

Individualism

“Individualism lies at the core of American culture” (Bellah 1996 p. 142). In fact, the term ‘individualism’ first appeared in the English language with the translation of Tocqueville’s work *Democracy in America*, describing key characteristics of the American people (Bellah, 1986). French political thinker and historian Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote *Democracy in America*, a two volume work - of which Nicholas Lezard (2004) claims: “So much...holds true, or roughly true, today. You simply cannot find a better book about the American character (Lezard, 2004)” – in 1835 and 1840; a period of great social change in western societies, in which a shift from aristocracy to more equalitarian democracy occurred.

Tocqueville’s quest was to discover and describe as much as he could about American Democracy: its characteristics, functioning, predictions and relevance for

other civil societies, such as France. Tocqueville's work is considered an early work of sociological and political science. His was an effort to: "instruct democracy... to adapt its government to time and place; to modify it according to circumstances and men" (Tocqueville 2000, p. 7). In describing the key characteristics of the American people, shaped by the state of its government in a free democracy, Tocqueville discusses such themes as: religion, the family, the tyranny of the majority, materialism, and individualism. Bellah (1986) quotes Tocqueville's discovery of the first roots of 'individualism' in U.S. society:

There are more and more people who though neither rich nor powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained or kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands (Tocqueville, quoted in Bellah 1986, p. 2).

Bellah believes that "many of those sentences Tocqueville wrote describe so accurately the mentality of the American middle class today."

Bellah (1986) also points to another well-known person of Tocqueville's time: Ralph Waldo Emerson – a strong advocate of individualism and non-conformity, well known for his leadership of the transcendentalism movement of the mid 19th century (Merriman 2007). Transcendentalists believe that the ideal spirituality is realized only through individual's intuition – transcending the physical and empirical, and doctrines of established religions. Moreover, Bellah (1986) describes Emerson as a person whose "devotion to what he calls the capital virtue of self-trust makes him leery of the dependence of the self on others but also of others on the self." Like Tocqueville, Emerson too talks about the virtue of self-reliance as new, "just coming into the world... another sign of our times" (p. 4). Yet, to this day, Emerson's essays – espousing concepts such as individuality, freedom, and self-reliance – continue to inspire and reflect essential elements of American thinking. (p. 4).

The question: "define The American Idea," posed to the readers of the *Atlantic Monthly* for its 150th anniversary special in 2008 revealed such similarities between current notions of American individualism, and those expressed by historic voices such as Tocqueville and Emerson. Below are a few segments from the individual responses, which can be said to represent modern day, intellectual American discourse on individuality:

“...what to me is the Organizing Principle or Idea of America: there is none. The American Idea, really, is the individual idea.” *Jude Blanchette*

“True freedom requires us to believe in ourselves, needing no outside law and trusting none.” *Matthew Ryan Kelley*

“individuals form nations, ...Since this nation's inception, individuality has been nurtured, celebrated, and elevated above conformity.” *Thomas M. Hill*

And yet, “Tocqueville observed that Americans are great joiners, that voluntary associations are a vigorous form of social life in America, that when Americans are disturbed about something they get together to do something about it.” (Bellah 1986, p. 2). For “if the language of the self-reliant individual is the first language of the American moral life, the languages of tradition and commitment in communities...are the second languages that most Americans know well, and which they use when the language of the radically separate self does not seem adequate (Bellah 1996, p. 154).

‘Community’

‘Community’ has been idealized in U.S. society for centuries, specifically as agents of social change, and often in opposition to a ‘dominant’ model of social, cultural, spiritual, political, economic, or the more recently emphasized: environmentally-oriented organization of society. One could say that, since the inception of the nation, Americans have sought refuge in (intentional) communities, and the collective effort to improve their lives and “do the job that the state is failing to do” (Taylor 2007, p. 102).

History of communal living:

Sociology professor, Robert C. Schehr (1997) describes the purpose of the first chapter of his book, *Dynamic Utopia: Establishing Intentional Communities as a New Social Movement*, (of which, it can be said, Schehr is an enthusiastic proponent), as an effort to “satisfy sociological concerns with recognizing in contemporary social phenomena their historical lineage, enabling us to better understand their motivations which are compounded by specific political, economic, and cultural catalysts compelling them toward community” (p. 25). Schehr (1997) presents a descriptive timeline of communitarian movements in the U.S.:

Beginning with the Plymouth Pilgrims in 1620, sharing skills, knowledge, and resources (p. 27), to the townships of the eighteenth century, which developed as “a conscious effort to establish social space between communitarianism and utilitarian individualism” (p. 27), and advocated a “return to tradition, the ideal of perfected community” (p. 27) during the post-civil war era. Some of the communitarian efforts established in the 18th-19th century, such as the Amish (founded in 1727) still exist today.

The mid-nineteenth century saw the rise of socialist communities, which, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, constituted one of the “numberless projects of social reform” of the time (p. 28). Utopians, at the end of the nineteenth century, “attempted to present a vision of America based on a redefined social and political economy and hoped to create an adversary culture” (Fogerty 1990, p. 9, cited in Schehr 1997, p. 28), “largely in response to the inhumanity of industrialization” (Schehr 1997, p. 27).

Between 1860-1914, Utopian writers and practical communists joined forces. These social movements shared an “immanent critique of American culture” coupled with a belief in a cooperative state (p. 28). Moreover, these “communitarians believed *they would come to symbolize for all the world what was possible... they would indeed become laboratories for experimentation*” (p. 28). (Italics added by me, to emphasize the similarity in discourse used by intentional communities, specifically Ecovillages, today).

During the economic and political repression and, the depression of the late 1880, “socialists, anarchists, and Christian socialist activists articulated cooperative community as a viable alternative to economic instability and political and cultural oppression” (p. 29), produced by capitalism.

The decade of the 1960s “produced the most expansive wave of communal activity in American history” in which people “experimenting with alternative community lifestyles were searching for simplicity, reconnection with nature, pursuits of meaningful existence, and spirituality, often with the aid of mind-expanding drugs, to counter the prevalence of greed, alienation, violence, and war” (p. 45). While they share many similar ideologies – and both “serve as a significant symbolic affront to the dominant culture” (p. 45). Schehr paints the communes of the 60s as a ‘childish’ version of contemporary intentional communities (ICs) “ They smoked lots of dope,

dropped acid, and listened to rock and roll searching for answers to unparalleled social problems, but they lacked the sophistication necessary for maintaining community” (p. 45). Sounding like a true advocate of contemporary ICs, Scher lauds them for having “come a long way in terms of conflict resolution and sophistication in articulating their political, social, cultural, and economic concerns” (p. 45).

Further differences between pre-twentieth century commons and contemporary communities, as identified by McLaughlin and Davidson (1990, p. 89-90) are summarized by Schehr (p. 43): Most communities today are less communal and restrictive, they usually do not require members to give up all their possessions, pool all their resources, or raise their children communally. They are less isolated from the rest of society; there is also a very significant amount of networking between contemporary ICs across the country and the globe, and a “strong dedication to community outreach” (p. 46). Furthermore, most contemporary communities express a more “egalitarian interest in consensus rather than relying on the hierarchical leadership of charismatic personalities” (p. 44).

While different in some respect, modern day intentional communities share many similarities with communitarian movements of the past. In short: “De Tocqueville’s keen observation that Americans exercise their individuality by joining groups.... Is as true now as it was in 1830s” (Taylor 2007, p. 102).

The benefits of community, particularly when it comes to empowering individuals for social change, have oft been espoused. Stevenson (2002) concludes his article, *Communities of Tomorrow* by quoting Margaret Mead, as once having said: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.” (p. 744).

Scanning the definitions of ‘the American Ideal’ submitted to the *Atlantic Monthly* in 2008, one finds, amongst the praises of American individuality, the acknowledgement of united efforts, and a cry for ‘community:’

When governments fail to offer master plans or grand visions for collective action, as ours has done, a spontaneous and organic order arises. Think of the local church support network, a pick-up basketball league, or the small bakery that opened down the road. These are Edmund Burke’s “little platoons,” and they can be bigoted and exclusionary or welcoming and expressive. *Jude Blanchette*

“Can we cut back, husband our resources, and share more equally? Can we learn new forms of citizenship based upon participation and *community*? Is a new American idea possible in the age of limits?” *Greg Studen*

“Oneness, the unum derived from our pluribus, remains our elusive national theme. We are many still trying to be one, trying to be “we.” *Missy Daniel*

The latter observation will lead us into the next section, which deals with the imperative question: How should one, and to what extent can one understand the sometimes “competing [discourse] of community and diversity” (Alperson 2002, p. 2). How has the relationship or balance between these ideals of individuality, and community/social responsibility in U.S. society been defined?

I will begin with a discussion of standpoints that problematize what is perceived as “excessive individualism” in U.S. society.

Individualism vs. Communitarianism

The social/political movement known as ‘communitarianism’ describes one take on the tension between the disparate discourses of American ‘individualism’ and ideal of ‘community.’ Samuel Walker (1998), said to be a widely quoted expert on civil liberties, and interviewed by every major media outlet in the United States, including CNN, the New York Times, Washington Post, etc. (samuelwalker.net/bio), positions ‘communitarianism’ as an attack on individual rights – a sentiment that has been voiced by conservatives and those on the political left alike.

Commentators from very different political perspectives were saying many of the same things, albeit with different agendas [.....] The problem is not [about] any particular right – the rights of criminal suspects, abortion, affirmative action – but the underlying idea that [individual] rights should be given the highest priority on matters of law and social policy. The issue is....the pervasive culture of rights (p. xiv).

Walker (1998) portrays communitarian ideals as “appeal[ing] to a noble sentiment: that we should think more about the general well being of society, and less about our own selfish interests” (p. xiii). A communitarian approach to social organization would involve people seeking “compromise, mutual understanding and the discovery of common ground,” rather than “always insisting on our own rights” (Glendon 1991, in Walker 1998, p. 26). Communitarians believe that:

The pendulum of contemporary society has swung too far in the direction of individual autonomy at the expense of individual and social responsibility.

[...] In finding solutions to our social problems, communitarians seek to rely neither on costly government programs nor on the market alone, but on the powerful ‘third force’ of the community (‘The communitarian Vision’ 2010).

Americans across the political spectrum, and as we have seen in the previous section, across the ages, have espoused the ideal of ‘community’ in one form or another. However, “What degree of individual autonomy, idiosyncrasy [and] privacy can or should communities tolerate in the context of their collective goals and ideals?” (Alperson (2002, p. 2).

Individuality vs. group cohesion, vitality, and agency

The following sections will further elucidate the perceived clash between ‘community’ and (the free expression of) individual differences, specifically as it pertains to the vitality of group, community, or nation – and its ability to accomplish its goals.

Walker (1998) discusses the critical discontent with ‘identity politics,’ -“the habit of thinking of ourselves in terms of discrete groups, rather than as Americans with a common culture” – and the “balkanization” of U.S. society, encouraged by an emphasis on “rights” (p. xiv), expressed among communitarians and those of a similar social/political persuasion. They claim that the growth of [a new discourse focused on individual] “rights” and, “uninhibited, expressive individualism ” has undermined community (Walker 1998, p. xiii).

In December 2000, Robert N. Bellah, was awarded the United States National Humanities Medal, “for his efforts to illuminate the importance of community in American society. A distinguished sociologist and educator, he has raised our awareness of the values that are at the core of our democratic institutions and of the dangers of individualism unchecked by social responsibility” (Harford Institute for Religion Research, 2011). During a lecture presented in 1986, Bellah explained that:

There isn't any moral language except how *I* feel, what *I* prefer, what *I* feel comfortable with. There is an inability in most of educated America to have any moral conversation about what is good because it is considered inappropriate for you to make a statement that anything in particular is good. You have to preface it with: I think, I feel. You have to subjectivize it. This undermining of any possibility of coming to a common moral understanding of the world I think greatly weakens our capacity to be citizens (p. 9)

An emphasis on individual differences and perspectives, threatens the establishment of a common/collective identity, is the argument. And without that sense of unity, found in a common identity, a 'community' lacks agency, as will be further exemplified in the following sections.

Martin Luther King Jr. (1968/2010), in his book: *Where do we go from Here: Chaos or Community?* discussed the importance of maintaining a unified identity, for the purpose of striving toward a common goal, and how internal division leads to disempowerment and can create significant setbacks in the achievement of a collective mission. These dynamics can be observed in the 'black community' from pre-abolition times through the struggles of the Civil Rights movement in the United States of America.

Before abolition, there was no black 'community.' Far from their homeland, separated from their families, tribe, and community, lacking a common ancestry, language, or sense of 'identity-' the only thing they had in common was the color of their skin, and their position as slaves. Noel (1972) claims that it was precisely this lack of 'unity' among the enslaved negroes in America that contributed to their lack of power and agency in the Americas around the 17th century, making them exceptionally vulnerable to persistent exploitation.

African slaves were made into a distinct social category, but they did not at first see themselves as such. There was no sense of "we" - the black people, the Africans – among them. "The absence of a shared identification among seventeenth century Negroes reflected the absence of a shared heritage from which to construct identity, draw strength, and organize protest" (Noel 1972, p. 120). Without a common identity, enslaved Africans were virtually powerless on American soil.

Centuries later division plagued the Civil Rights movement too. The movement momentarily seemed in danger of losing its power, due to discord over the interpretations and use of the slogan 'black power,' as well as varying degrees of incentive to abide by the laws of 'non-violence,' and some voices of disagreement about the level to which 'whites' should be allowed to act along-side blacks, in 'their' battle (King 1968/2010, p. 25, 30). King remarked that a group gains power through "unity, determination, and creative endeavor" (p.31). But he suggests that this unity

should not be based on exclusion (of white supporters), or on resorting to violence, for that matter.

The formidable foe we now face demands more unity than ever before, and I will stretch every point to maintain this unity, but I cannot in good conscience agree to continue my personal involvement...in the march if it is not publicly affirmed that it is based on nonviolence and the participation of both black and white (p. 29).

This perceived need for homogeneity, expressed amongst some of the activists, is reflected in debatable theoretical insights into the (exclusive) nature of community:

Theorists (Bauman 2001; Sartwell 2002; Bartels et al. 2010, p. 121), suggest that in order to maintain a secure identity, communities naturally construct and defend their boundaries. In his article *Community: Seeking safety in an insecure world*, Bauman (2001) discusses Robert Redfield's opinion that the unity of community depends on its homogeneity. Redfield moreover sees communities as static and unwilling to change. "In true communities there is no motivation towards reflection, criticism, or experimentation" (Bauman 2001, p. 12). Community implies restriction of individuality. Bauman further suggests that members of a community not only become alike, but, more importantly, in order to create unity in a community "homogeneity must be hand picked (p. 14). Sartwell (2002) similarly expresses the opinion that communities are per-definition based on exclusion. In his article *Community at the Margin*, he states that "It is... exclusion that make a community possible, because the exclusions define an identity for the [people] to share" (p. 48). An inclusive community, is it possible?

Differences in community - Belonging and inclusion:

How can the competing demands or ideal of 'community' on the one hand, and 'individuality' on the other hand be better understood and integrated?

Walker (1998) describes communitarians, as simultaneously cherishing a deep respect for values such as free speech and equality. Rather than merely criticizing (the idea of) individual rights, Walker defines the problem as "a stark dichotomy between rights and community [in American society]" (Walker 1998, p. 27). The appeal is for a better *balance* between individual rights and a sense of community/social responsibility.

The argument of the third chapter of Samuel Walkers (1998) book: *The Rights Revolution: Rights and Community in Modern America*, highlights that the pursuit of increased individual rights in society – women’s rights, gay rights, immigrant rights, etc. – rather than undermining community, “has moved American society in the direction of a more inclusive community” (p. 87). By claiming their ‘rights’ individuals “stake a claim of membership” to a particular community (p. 63). Rather than being *bestowed* upon members of a community, ‘rights’ become “the *means* by which membership itself is achieved” (p. 63). In that regard “the rights revolution cultivates the values of tolerance and equality, producing a more inclusive community” (p. 88).

Walker thus simultaneously acknowledges the deep respect for individualism and individual rights, ingrained in the American psyche and discourse, as well as the persistent goal of forming collectives, communities, a unified nation; presenting both ideals such that one does not exclude the other. Rather, the acknowledgement of one (individualism) contributes to the formation of the other (community). As Martin Luther King Jr. (1968/2010) has attested, “in winning rights for ourselves, we have produced substantial benefits for the whole nation” (p. 141).

Bellah (1995) offers another, practical, perspective on incorporating individual differences into communities, starting with a description of how ‘communities’ are formed in the first place:

Now what makes any kind of group a community and not just a contractual association for the maximization of the interests of the individuals involved, is a shared concern with the question what will make this group a good group. Any institution, such as a university, a city or a society, insofar as it is or seeks to be a community needs to ask what is a good university, city, society, etc. So far as it reaches agreement about the good it is supposed to realize - and that will always be contested and open to further debate - it becomes a community with some common values but also common goals (p. 2).

And how such shared values which turns the group into a community, are actualized:

In my understanding of community shared values and goals imply something more than procedural agreement, they do imply some agreements about substance, but they do not require anything like total or unarguable agreement. My idea of a good community is one in which there is argument, even conflict, about the meaning of the shared values and goals, and certainly about how they will be actualized in everyday life. Community as I see it is a form of intelligent, reflective life, in which there is indeed consensus, but where the

consensus can be challenged and changes, often gradually, sometimes radically, over time (p. 1).

Bellah thus emphasizes that unity in a community, no matter how diverse, is created when everyone shares the same basic vision and goals, for the community – which are, however, not static and eternally uncontested. Interpretations as to what these values imply, and how goals are to be accomplished can, and will vary. The establishment of guiding principles toward the formation of cooperative communities are socially constructed - a process ideally involving all of the members of a community, and not imposed on anyone.

On a national level, Rodriquez-Garcia (2010) proposes ‘Interculturalism’ as a theory that encompasses these ideals for the incorporation of differences in society. Interculturalism refers to the “interactive process of living together in diversity with the full participation...of, and social exchange between, all members of society” (p. 260). This theory of civil organization “invites the possibility of mutual criticism and mutual learning across differences” (p.261). Rodriquez-Garcia’s research moreover attests that “allowing differences to enter into ‘civil sphere’ results in enlarged and more heterogeneous space, but at the same time it leads to greater social cohesiveness” and increases a sense of belonging (Alexander 2006, cited in Rodriquez-Garcia 2010, 262). Putnam (2007) likewise “calls for the construction of new, more encompassing identities” (p. 139).

“Do we have a national community? Yes and no. I believe we have some shared values and goals, though there is enormous conflict over what they are and what they mean (Bellah 1995, p. 3)”. And yet “we are optimistic about kinds of political involvement that bring people into a continuing organization where they can work out together what they are trying to do -argue, even fight with each other but sustain some kind of long-term commitment rather than writing the check for the single issue that happens to fit my mood at this moment”. (Bellah 1986, p. 8).

In the article *Communities of Tomorrow* (2002), Stevenson, builds his argument toward a description of a ‘viable’ (or socially sustainable) community – one which “recognises that, to be creative and viable in a global world, it must be inclusive of

difference and open to change. (Stevenson, 2002, p. 743). He begins his analysis with problem statement, discussing the importance community, citing such theorist as Robert Putnam and his famous study on (the loss of) 'social capital' in U.S. society due to a declining participation in 'community' life, and continuing on to describing today's multitude of (often idealized) definitions of 'community.' Thus paving the way for 'the hook:'

Too often, the meaning of community ignores the co-existence of difference, assuming mainly that communities are spaces and places where people are similar to each other, who all get along with each other. Yet the reality is that communities embrace diverse personal interests, linkages, value sets, intentions and even contentions. For me, *community* suggests the artful act of co-operation among people with a variety of different abilities, needs and views of the world (Stevenson 2002, p. 737).

Stevenson then cites other researchers who share his view:

To Burkett, community is a paradoxical experience. It is about difference just as much as unity. [...] Privileging one of these oppositions in interpreting community denies the transforming powers of human communion and resorts to fixed ideas about community. In fact, we need to embrace these very tensions if we are to discover, or rediscover, community as a life system of the twenty-first century (Stevenson, 2002, p. 738).

Communities of the 21st century can thus be seen as inherently heterogeneous, rather than ideally homogenous. Rather than actively trying to protect a common identity through practices of exclusion or restrictions on the expression of differences, the challenge is now to incorporate differences into an expanded notion of group identity, thereby forming inclusive communities.

Conclusion

Individualism is often seen as the defining feature of U.S. society. As early as the mid-19th century, intellectuals and scholars, such as Alexis de Tocqueville and Ralph Waldo Emerson, picked up on this 'individualism' as a unique characteristics of and for the American people; at the same time, Americans across the ages and political spectrum have espoused the ideal of 'community' in one form or another.

There is consensus that the free expression of one's individuality and community living are both desirable features of U.S. society, but there is disagreement about where the balance lies. Some voices, notably, the communitarians, believe that "the pendulum of contemporary society has swung too far in the direction of individual autonomy at the expense of [positive aspects

embodied in ideal communities]” (communitariannetwork.org).

Others believe that in order to sustain a coherent and cohesive group identity, ‘communities,’ tend to homogenize. In the context of the demographic and social changes that characterize 21st-century America, however, where encountering ‘diversity’ is inevitable – people are looking for ways to incorporate, or conceptualize, diversity in community, and unite these shared ideals.

Some perceptive readers of the *Atlantic Monthly* have captured this idea of ‘unity in diversity’ in their responses to the question: “Describe The American Idea.”

The lines that separate us as individuals, though contradictory, are not boundaries that divide; they are interstices that connect. Differences between heritages, religions and beliefs no longer represent irreconcilable forces that must be melted and molded into a single image. They represent necessary diversity. It is a misconception to think that the American Idea promotes the individual at the expense of the collective. The American Idea promotes the individual for the sake of the collective. By valuing the differences between people we acknowledge that the potential of each individual is different and that the potential for our collective nation is infinite. *Anna Crawley.*

The following chapters of this thesis will highlight the ways in which this tension has been expressed, and is played out, at the EcoVillage at Ithaca.

CHAPTER III: UNITY AND VISION IN THE COMMUNITY

The following chapter deals primarily with the questions: *How is a 'shared vision' defined? And how is the collective effort toward this vision experienced?*

It describes the construction of a group identity, mirroring Schehr's (1997) observations that communities often arise and define themselves in opposition to a dominant model or existing paradigm, and with the aim to collectively "do the job that the state is failing to do" (Taylor 2007, p. 102). However, (how) can one maintain a unified, shared vision, in order to promote and achieve collective efforts toward common goals? How are disagreements (or varying perspectives), and misconduct handled? And how do the more communitarian-oriented members in the community experience and conceptualize 'individuality'?

Jackson (2004) describes the Ecovillage movement as a reaction against "the dominant economic model" of Western society in which the negative social and environmental consequences of the mass production, consumption, and trading of goods have no negative economic impact, and therefore these damages become "invisible" to those blinded by this influential paradigm that emphasizes economic prosperity over social and environmental responsibility (p. 3).

This sentiment was clearly visible after the showing and discussion of the documentary film: *The Economics of Happiness* – one of the very few times I saw a substantial number of Villagers in one room, enthusiastic about the same things, appreciatively agreeing with each others' statements; such unity of vision and consensus of ideas. The following ethnographic account shows momentary open agreement to and understanding of a shared vision or set of ideals – a seemingly mutually inspired atmosphere, which later proved to be less clear cut and sustainable. The movie, shown in the Frog common house, Friday March 4th drew a big crowd of about 20 EcoVillagers – including some I had rarely or never seen before.

The Economics of Happiness reveals bleak scenarios from different parts of the planet and individuals' lives, the gloom of which, it is argued, can be traced to the effects of economic globalization. This globalization is said to contribute to global warming, ethnic conflict, unemployment, increasingly busy and stressful lives, and other such ailments of the planet and societies. It then presents a positive picture of social change, arguing that local communities will serve as the primary vehicle for

this necessary, social and planetary paradigm shift - toward “a very different future” - while chastising “big corporations” and “global businesses” which currently dominate “the system.” in which we are all entangled (“About the film,” 2011).

According to the directors of the film: “A systemic shift – away from globalizing economic activity and towards the local – is an almost magic formula that allows us to reduce our ecological footprint while increasing human well-being” (Norberg-Hodge, Gorelick, & Page, 2011), mirroring EcoVillage’s mission statement:

To promote experiential learning about ways of meeting human needs for shelter, food, energy, livelihood and social connectedness that are aligned with the long term health and viability of Earth and all its inhabitants. (Adopted by the EVI Board 28 October 2009).

After the movie, the Villagers were in awe, and immediately began comparing their own efforts to the kind of lifestyle promoted in this movie. The main sentiment being: EcoVillage is not quite radical enough. We are making a substantial effort, but still facing many blockages to truly making this vision a living reality. “There could be even more radical sharing,” one EcoVillager suggested. The re-use room in the Frog common house, where residents donate their no-longer-wanted clothes, toys, shoes, books, etc, for other residents to take, the EcoVillage car-share (several families who share one car), and the ‘rides to town’ frequently requested and found through the EcoVillage list-serve (one email address that everyone at EVI is connected to) – is a good start, but we haven’t gotten ourselves out of the general consumerism culture.

“The system is in denial about the problems the planet is facing,” another villager added. And yet it is so influential. The governments, the big corporations, the media, are trying to define “The good life” for us. “We are just being brain-washed by the system everyday,” others agreed, and the need for large-scale political movements and national and international change - as well as local, individual and community efforts -was acknowledged.

The discussion continued about things they were doing, as a village, as well as individually to work toward a better planet, and fight the “existing paradigm” as well as confess the ways in which “we still goof up,” and the challenges of being a conscious consumer: “Even though we all know, and are now made even more aware, from this movie, that “buying local” is better for the planet (because of the fossil fuel

it takes to bring products from other countries or even states, to our plates), I must admit, I don't always buy local... locally grown food is more expensive, thus in the short/immediate term, it costs us more," another person confessed.

"Time poverty" was moreover described as an obstacle to achieving 'the good life.' "Always feeling rushed, [partly due to having to over-work ourselves in order to afford living here], really gets in the way of developing deeper connections with each other," people lamented. The Economics of Happiness described the human need for closer, personal social connections and interdependence: To move away from the impersonal sociality created by globalization and the internet, and back to personal face-to-face interaction. The movie sparked, or rekindled rather, a shared passion for all of these ideals. In the days after the movie, EcoVillagers began arranging more spontaneous social events, "inspired by the movie," inviting others to engage in conversation, or play games, at the common house, or re-advertising their own local businesses, etc., as the following emails exemplify:

Monday March 7th

I've been thinking for a while now of reviving the practice that Phebe and I started last year of having a monthly Salon....I was inspired by the discussion after the movie Friday night (The Economics of Happiness – well worth borrowing from Tony and Carol if you missed it) about getting away from our computer screens and email discussions and having more conversations in person

March 7th

Reduce cabin fever, have fun, and build community.

Monday nights at Frog CH starting at 6:45pm. Bring a board game (chess, checkers, etc), cards....If you'd like to lead an art/crafting activity on particular Monday, let me know and I will publicize it. Officially starting next Monday, March 14, and continuing through April."

March 7th

A big public thank you to Tony for organizing the movie night on Fri where we watched "The Economics of Happiness." The movie was great, and the post-movie conversation with other village members even better. I enjoyed it so much and am still stimulated by all of it. I felt so inspired by this village, amazed that I have the opportunity to live here, and in awe of the intelligence, creativity and commitment of all of you who have created this village and who are here now. What a gift to ourselves, our community, our global awareness, and the future. Looking forward to continuing the conversation!

After the movie, everyone seemed thoroughly impressed and there was an overall atmosphere of agreement that the alternatives described in the film are the right path from which we shall not veer and which we shall not criticize.

Two days later however, at a private discussion in one of the EcoVillagers' homes, after Monday night's meal at the Common House, critique was aired about the movie's assumptions and its 'brainwashing' criticism of globalization. The first comments came from a Villager who had not watched the movie with the rest of the Village, but was around to witness the discussion afterwards. He later borrowed the DVD and watched the movie on his own. He had written up his, critical, comments in response, which he now shared with this group. Others in this small group quickly chimed in with their critique. They too had perceived flaws in the message of the movie – which they hadn't been able to point out in the shared euphony of the moment either because they hadn't realized until directly after the discussion, or because it was simply difficult to challenge the unquestioning sense of inspiration this movie inspired in the Village.

“The word “local, local, local,” was being repeated in the movie, and afterwards, during the discussion. Like a chant. A magic formula,” Eleanor indicated. The Economics of Happiness rightfully attacked the brainwashing that occurs in society – was one of the points raised in the discussion directly after the movie, but in a way, the movie was also brainwashing people with *its* message, is the conclusion that the critical crowd was drawing now. I noticed, in the movie, when a “definition of globalization” came up, with a list of negative things that can be attributed to globalization, followed by a statement proclaiming – (*Globalization*) ...sometimes mistaken for: (all that is positive about globalization) And then a positive definition of “localization,” which is “sometimes mistaken for (all that is bad about localization, e.g. ethnocentric, etc.)”

“The whole idea of ‘keeping it local’ just seems like another mantra that has come out of an individualistic society. Ok, we’re moving beyond just being concerned about ourselves and our own family. Now we want to feel connected with our neighbors in a small town as well. Create this nice, friendly little bubble for ourselves – but where’s the broader perspective? How is what we’re doing locally going to solve the world’s problems?” Vincent asked.

Funny how, when people have had some time to absorb information and think it through on their own, overnight, or over the weekend, (or those who viewed the movie on their own, vs. with the whole group) they suddenly come up with different ideas, or see another side. One person commented that, even if you had seen something negative, or a point of critique at the time, it would have been difficult to say anything in that kind of atmosphere, where everyone was in full admiration of the movie and in 'full consensus' with each other that it was great, "so inspiring!" - You wouldn't want to "rain on everyone's parade."

As we were walking back to my house, one of the people was contemplating, out loud, whether to share his points of critique about the movie with the whole village, over the list-serve – weighing the pros and cons of such an action – or the reasons for doing it, vs. resisting that urge. I may have accidentally talked him out of sending his remarks to the whole village, when I mentioned, empathetically summarizing his own arguments and those discussed by the others in the small group, that "of course, you don't want to ruin the moment. I've never experienced such a powerful sense of unity at EcoVillage! – Everyone agreeing and in awe of the same thing. You wouldn't want to be the one to burst that bubble. Or as Jae said: 'Rain on their parade.'"

He never did send out his critical comments – nobody did. But the initial euphoric moment, and new intentions, the sudden spark of unity and common vision, the momentary shared understanding that "this is what its all about!" did not linger very long. While plenty of social activities and discussions continue to be organized on a weekly bases as EVI, the new social initiatives - weekly game nights, monthly salons (organized but casual conversations about a particular topic) spontaneous invites to discuss "what's on our hearts", etc. - inspired by the movie and comments made afterwards occurred only once. The first games night, six of us played Clue, but in the weeks after that, no one showed up with games on Mondays after the meal, and I have not seen an invite to a 'monthly' salon for the month of April or May come up on the list-serve. It's hard to 'sustain' these great initiatives - to truly break through old ways of doing things and hold on to one's good intentions especially when these require the cooperation of other people.

(Positive) Social control: Promoting a collective effort toward common goals

In many ways EcoVillagers are good at helping and encouraging one another to lead more sustainable lives. Inspiring media articles and videos are shared through the list-serve; [e.g. “low-carbon rush hour in the Netherlands” featuring, fast-forwarded video footage of hundreds of cyclist passing a central point somewhere in Utrecht.]. By passing along such sparks of inspiration or information, found whilst independently surfing the internet or perusing a magazine, EcoVillagers, remind each other of particular values held dear, and help spread an awareness of important issues and innovations.

Moreover, (usually friendly, sometimes frustrated) reminders to separate trash, not use scented laundry soap, etc. also regularly appear on the list-serve. For example:

I'm wondering if someone could reiterate our policy for Frog washers regarding scented laundry products. My recollection is that we ask folks not to use them in our common machines. I think that we're either not communicating that to new folks, or there was an oversight. Or I'm wrong in my recollections. My recent batch of laundry came back from the frog CH smelling of scented laundry soap.... In any case, I'd like to send out a plea to folks to use fragrance-free products in our common laundry machines. I'd also like to ask whoever was using the fragranced products not to feel badly about it! Really! (*email*).

And residents admit that this positive form of social influence is helpful:

“I’ve been learning so much about separating trash, and other ecological practices, because I know that if I do it wrong, someone is going to correct me. There will be an email saying ‘who threw this in the trash? It’s supposed to go in the recycle bin!’ And nine out of ten times, that person, who goofed up, would be me.” (*Focus group participant*).

While at other times, one resident’s attempt to ‘correct’ another’s behavior may not be appreciated, as the following scenario illustrates:

Conflict and small-scale rebellion

Ruby, some other people, and I were sitting at a table in the Song Common House, getting ready to eat our dinner.

Ruby: “Today I found two gloves- nothing else- spinning in top right dryer for an hour. So I took them out. Stuck a sign on the door saying ‘gloves. Do not. Belong. In the dryer. WASTE OF ENERGY!’” I washed them, by hand, too. They were smelly! I left them hanging on the drying rack, where they belong. Who puts gloves in the dryer?”

At that moment, another resident joined our dinner table and conversation,

visibly disturbed about something.

Rene: “I just went to get my sheets out of the dryer, and they were gone! They weren’t in the dryer anymore, and they weren’t on the folding table in the laundry room either. I was so confused! I was like: where could they be! I’m pretty sure I put them the dryer 45 minutes ago. The one on the top right. I checked the other dryers too, just incase...But they were nowhere to be found! If you think that sounds mysterious, wait ‘till you hear this: I found my sheets back in the washing machine! Going for another spin! And you know what was in the dryer where I’d left my sheets? One pair of gloves. I don’t get it. Who would do such a thing? and Why??”

A possible explanation for this ‘ecovillage mystery,’ offered by one of the people at the table, was that someone had been really miffed, not only about being corrected for ‘inappropriate behavior’ at an Ecovillage, but quite possibly also disturbed about finding the gloves, not dry, but wet again, when he or she returned to the laundry room. He or she wanted to get even, found Rene’s sheets in the dryer where the gloves had previously been, figured she most have done it, and decided to re-wash her sheets the way ‘she’ had previously rewashed the almost-dry gloves, demonstratively putting said gloves back in the dryer. Probably one of ‘the teens did it.’ (A recurrent, often jokingly used, expression at EcoVillage).

Divergent values were further expressed in the recent ‘bumper-sticker contest.’ On the 2nd of April, one of the residents, Tom, send out an email announcing his intentions to create an EcoVillage bumper sticker, and asking for input for this fun project. The plan was that residents would submit their ideas in his mailbox before April 15, and Tom would pick some judges and proceed “at no cost to you.” I thought the assignment was to create a bumper sticker on a “three by ten inch” piece of cardboard to be submitted in Tom’s mailbox. Although it had been stated that the only “Rules are – there are no rules” I was surprised, the following days, to see over 50 submissions and contributions to the ‘bumper sticker debate’ appear on the list-serve!

The slogans people came up with featured words such as “green” or “sustainable,” “future” or “vision” while several pointed out the inherent irony of *Ecovillagers* sporting *plastic* bumper sticker on their *cars*, or stated that a bumper

sticker (as a form of bragging about a particular status or identity) goes against their values, specifically indicating not wanting to encourage the term “Ego-village,” which has been heard coming out of the mouths of other Ithacans. Others voiced concerns about the process and whether this decision – which slogan to use, and if there was going to be a bumper sticker at all -was being made in a democratic way, or contributed humorous slogans, poking fun at some of the recurrent Ecovillage dilemmas: “The teens did it’ - Ecovillage at Ithaca.” "EcoVillage driver: Honk if I'm not carpooling" - acknowledging the encouragement of social control to help each other behave appropriately (or a sarcastic derision of said social control?), “Ecovillage at Ithaca – we could not reach consensus on a slogan.”

The problem of divergent values (in achieving a collective mission)

Not being able to ‘reach true consensus’ on what Ecovillage is or should be about is a big issue that specifically plagues some of the more radical ecological or communitarian minded villagers. How is the goal and vision of Ecovillage – to become an experimental model for living sustainably in the environment and with each other – being achieved, or hindered through internal differences and diversity in the community?

Let us first consider how internal differences can be perceived to disrupt the sense of unity required to reach for common aims and model the desired social change that is being envisioned for society.

This dilemma is the main focus of Prudence-Elise Breton’s Environmental Studies master’s thesis: *Organizing for Sustainability at a small scale: A Case Study of an Ecovillage*, for which she spend approximately six weeks at Ecovillage at Ithaca as a participant-observer, conducting interviews, keeping field notes, and analyzing relevant documents. Breton (2009) begins her thesis by describing the trouble the world is in when it comes to environmental concerns, and recent acknowledgement of this by politicians, on a global scale. She then portrays local, small-scale communities as the most appropriate motors of social change. She uses Organizational Theory to look specifically at the internal organization of the Ecovillage. “Definitions of *organization* emphasize the need for groups to [collectively] accomplish tasks that require more than one person to manage the size or complexity (p. 48). Breton notes that: “The functioning of the organization depends on member involvement and their

level of dedication to the organizational mission and goals” (p. 138). “However [at EcoVillage], not all members share the same values equally or understand norms in the same way. (p. 145). This, according to Breton, is the primary obstacle for EVI, in terms of achieving its goals and fulfilling its mission.

I have heard this sentiment expressed by some of my informants, too:

“I mostly start to feel frustrated at meetings. People bring in their little items, and we listen to each other, most of the time, but there isn’t a sense of connecting it to a larger purpose, you know? The meetings are not about bringing out the creativity of the group, allowing each individual to work toward a common goal. We are more focused on allowing everyone to express what *they* feel is important” (Edward, resident since 1996, paraphrased from an interview).

Other residents in the community have expressed very similar sentiments. Wesley, for example: Whilst drying and putting away dishes after a common house meal, I asked him, if he had found the EcoVillage community to be what he had expected, or was hoping to find before he moved here. He expressed that, while he is very happy living at EcoVillage, some things do trouble him, and are contrary to what he had expected from an intentional community. For instance “I had thought there would be more of a collective effort toward, and common understanding of, a ‘shared vision.’ Rather than people showing up at meetings, just to make sure that things get done the way that they would like to see them get done, which seems to be the reality around here. I find that very unfortunate” (Wesley).

Such expression reflect Bellah’s (1986), concern about the emphasis on “I” in U.S. discourse - e.g. “*I* feel, *I* prefer, what *I* feel comfortable with...”(p. 9), versus the communitarian vision of “thinking more about the general well-being of [the group] and less about one’s own selfish interests” (Walker 1998, p. 26), or making an effort to “sustain some kind of long-term commitment rather than writing the check for the single issue that happens to fit my mood at this moment” (Bellah 1986, p. 8), as described in the Theory chapter of this thesis.

“Different levels of intensity, and visions, about what we’re doing...makes it really frustrating for people on the activist end, who ‘want to get on with it.’ The whole mission is fuzzy: are we just a ‘green suburb,’ a nice place to live, or is this really a collective effort for an emergency planetary situation, to create a place that is truly sustainable and a model to the world? ... Personally, I feel EcoVillage is not quite adequate for the time [the times require a more radical changes in lifestyle for north Americans and the rest of the world, in

order to preserve the planet for future generations]What really bothers me is the degree to which it is just ‘optional’ how much you feel or want to be connected to the main mission. People all come here for different reasons, and its disrupting the vision’ (Edward, Ecovillage resident since 1996, interview).

What is the mission?

The following statements are opinions expressed by EVI residents (directly or indirectly) in response to the above question.

“EcoVillage was founded on a strong motivation to change the world, to help build a better world, to provide a model community and educate people on how to create such a community” (Els, co-founder and resident of Ecovillage, interview).

“I feel that showing that Americans can create an alternative to suburbia that is much more fulfilling and much less ecologically destructive is a great gift and resource for the world, that we are just in the early stages of refining here” (Edward, resident since 1996, question of the day response)

“I came here because I felt we needed a more sustainable model for other parts of society to follow, or at least adopt some of our ideas” (Silvia, resident since 2001, question of the day response).

“To become a living laboratory of a socially and environmentally sustainable community” (Walker, 2010, p. 7, co-founder and resident of EcoVillage).

Conclusion

It can be said that, if the mission is to model, and eventually bring about a significant social and cultural change in society, a shared vision of what change(s) need to be modeled, and a united effort toward this mission is required. As King (1968/2010) remarked (see Theory chapter of this thesis) one of the primary ingredients for sustaining a collective effort for social change, is unity. Those who identify strongly with a particular mission, thus tend to feel frustrated and disempowered by the fact that others in the community sometimes carry a different interpretation of the mission, or do not align themselves strongly with collective aims.

On the other end of the spectrum are those who actually fear the (vision of the) community is homogenizing – different needs/opinions/concerns/ideas are not given enough voice – these individuals may also feel disempowered within the community, but for different reasons. Their side of the story, as well as those who actually feel quite comfortable, no pressure, about the fact that they themselves are not as “goal” or

“future” oriented toward a community vision, will be heard in the following chapter, which will further illuminate the ways in which differences and disagreements are experienced and managed in the community.

Chapter IV: THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE COMMUNITY

The role and experience of the individual, individuality, and various differences in the community.

This ethnographic account – based on one day in the field, but also drawing on data, observations, conversations and documents referring to previous occurrences and focus groups - introduces a few of the many Ecovillagers I associated with, revealing their diversity and (the complexity of) their social relations to one another.

Particularly, it focuses on how different individuals experience being different surprisingly differently. Showcasing which differences are sometimes problematic to incorporate satisfactorily into the community (those defined as individual needs, and particularly, differing interpretations of, or ways of incorporating, the vision in one's lifestyle choices), while other types of differences (such as individual motivations) are understood to make up a natural and generally (albeit begrudgingly for some) accepted form of diversity at EcoVillage, and still others (those understood as a diversity in individual interests and expertise) are greatly appreciated. This chapter thus exemplifies the question: *How are differences experienced (differently by different individuals) in the community?*

On being different in the community

At one pm I had invited Toby and Grace over to my place. I offered them chocolate, which they had to decline, but they did enjoy the rooibos tea. Upon entering, Grace commented. “We won't be able to stay in this house for very long” because of the building material that was used. Theirs is the only house they can stay in comfortably for a longer period of time. They joined EcoVillage when the second part of the SoNG neighborhood was still being developed – building their own unique home, perfectly suited for people, such as them, suffering from Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS).

Previously, Toby had invited me over for lunch at their place, to talk about my research and their experiences living at Ecovillage. Therefore, what follows is a compilation of those two conversations, including some email correspondence. I will moreover include relevant or related data from focus groups involving, and comments made by, other Ecovillagers.

Let me introduce the following sections by stating that Toby and Grace, and some of the views they express are not at all representative of the community as a whole. Different individuals, on different occasions, have expressed disparate views on and have had different experiences with issues- such as “equality,” “inclusion” and “tolerance” - in the community. I have contemplated whether I should even include some of the following debatable opinions in my thesis, but have decided to do so. I do not want to ignore certain genuine expressions and concerns just because not everyone is likely to agree. Also, I have made it my goal to give equal voice to the various, and indeed sometimes disparate, experiences and accounts of life at EcoVillage.

To a certain extent, one could say that Toby and Grace embody ‘the individuals’ most likely to find themselves having to ‘get in the way of’ and oppose community, or other individuals’ plans at Ecovillage. They are minorities on two levels - lower income, and a disability that requires a lot of consideration from people living around them (Multiple Chemical Sensitivity - extreme reactions to chemical/unnatural smells, such as scented body products, wood smoke from fireplaces, and smoke lingering in the kitchen after cooking). Therefore, they notice and object to a lot of the group’s ways of thinking that may (potentially) lead to exclusion of particular people (them, but also, for example, other people with lower income, or with asthma, who would also be negatively impacted by things like wood smoke, but whose reactions may not be as severe right away). They see themselves as “the canaries in the coal mine,” the first to raise the flag - and often face the disgruntlement from within the community.

Toby and Grace have done a lot of research into, and are strong advocates for, disability rights and fair housing (not only regarding their own disability, but also in terms of wheelchair accessibility, etc.), and often find themselves having to resort to the ‘it’s the law’ argument, when it comes to ensuring they will be able to go on living in an environment that is beneficial, not detrimental to their health, at EcoVillage. They would rather not have to bring up ‘the law’ all the time, but it is like a last straw for them because they sometimes feel as though they would not be taken seriously otherwise.

“Its like the Ecovillage developed as a movement against the extreme individualization that is present in U.S. society, but it seems like some have taken to the other extreme – extreme want for unity and for everyone to be the same, and be treated exactly the same – no exceptions. Standing up for your own needs, and claiming rights is seen as ‘so mainstream.’ Here at Ecovillage, we are taught to always consider the good of the group, and be able to let go of personal needs and desires,” *Toby*. One can thus begin to see the clash between a desire for community – based on “Thinking less about ourselves, and more about the best interests of the group” – and the free expression of individual rights, or the need to be mindful and inclusive of differences in the community. This tension will be further explored throughout this chapter.

Like some other members in the community, Toby expressed concern over the homogenization of the community, and perceived lack of tolerance, almost, toward different needs, opinions, perspectives, and or lifestyle choices. While Toby’s concerns was mostly toward a perceived lack of respect toward different needs, a similar sentiment was expressed by another EcoVillager, Bob - a resident who has been living at EcoVillage since its first year of existence, and now resides in the Song neighborhood – with regard to the expression of different opinions on shared values, and the freedom of individual lifestyle choices in upholding the vision.

During my first focus group discussion at EcoVillage, Bob commented that “For people to create, and feel like they belong to, a particular group identity, they automatically exclude those who are not like them, which I see happening here at EcoVillage, as it would in any community that is striving toward a common ideal. The question is, how do you widen your circle of inclusion?” Bob claims that the vitality of any group depends on its encouragement of dissent. This is something that is, unfortunately difficult to do here, according to Bob. “Groups (based on belonging) tend to reward loyalty, and expressing the same views as, or unquestioningly going along with, whatever, the group is doing. This general atmosphere at EcoVillage is very different from, for example, president Obama’s method of wanting to hear, and seek out, as many different points of view as possible...”

The other discussants in the focus group – all fairly recent arrivals to the Village - did not seem at all eager to discuss the critique raised by Bob any further,

anxious to change the topic. They continued the discussion with positive views on “inclusion of differences, social support, less competitiveness or ‘keeping up with the Jones’s,’ less judgment and concerns about privacy, a greater overall sense of ‘community’” etc. they have experienced at EcoVillage.

The expression of differences (in opinions) in the community

When people feel respected for their (differing) points of view and varying perspectives, it increases their sense of belonging to the group (similar to claims made by Rodriguez-Garcia 2010, and Putnam 2007, talking about respecting cultural differences in pluralistic society). Conversely, I can recall at least one instance, from my conversations with various EcoVillagers, in which people felt disrespected for disagreeing with the majority, or strongest voices, in the community on a particular issue and “felt ready to leave.” Their sense of belonging had been compromised.

The outdoor cat debate (which some have referred to as “the cat wars”) was evidently such an instance in which people were being criticized for their personal practices (having an outdoor cat), being told they were violating the community vision of living sustainably with the environment. While it may be true that “no one (at Ecovillage) confronts each other about this anymore,” and the issue may appear, on the surface, to be “in the past” *Frank*, almost all of my respondents immediately brought up this issue whenever interviews or conversations turned to “dealing with differences or divisive issues in the community,” if not voluntarily or in light of other, sometimes unrelated, threads. It seemed to be what everyone wanted to talk about with me, though perhaps not with each other. The meetings were apparently very contentious and the memories still present and painful for some.

Those who were in favor of restricting the number of outdoor cats at EVI (to no more than two per neighborhood) were doing so out of “a commitment to reducing our environmental impact,” (Village Meeting Minutes, August 17, 2008), labeling cats as an invasive species, brought in by human beings and posing an unbalanced threat to other creatures –such as native birds- in the natural ecosystem.

Those opposed to restrictions on the the number of outdoor cats thought such arguments were silly, even offensive, and based on false evidence. Their cat rarely killed birds – mostly only small rodents. And besides, “aren’t cats a part of nature’s

creatures too? And the fact that they hunt and kill sometimes, isn't that also only natural?"

Other opponents were not necessarily disagreeing with the fact that outdoor cats may not be in the best interest of the natural environment, but emphasized that the environmental impact of cats feels like a minor issue. Moreover, "why place these kind of restrictions on what people can and cannot do? What's next? Saying we can't travel by airplane? Restricting the number of children people can have? Because human beings are, after all, most destructive to the natural environment – even more of an invasive species than cats" (Paraphrased from Village Meeting Minutes, August 17, 2008 and personal conversations).

Penny felt that the way in which Bob and his wife Gemma were being portrayed, as careless of the environment and un-ecological people, was unacceptable and absurd. "Bob and Gemma and are some of the most ecologically advanced people I know! They are deeply concerned with the environment and living a sustainable lifestyle – in other words, they are strongly, and personally, committed to Ecovillage's environmental mission – so if they feel that their cat, being free in the outdoors, does not contradict those values or disrupt that vision, I feel we, as a village, should respect that. Who are we to tell people what they can and cannot do? Especially when those people are actually very committed to the mission" (Penny, personal conversation).

This sentiment reflects Rodriguez-Garcia's statement about Interculturalism, in which "differences [can be] recognized as legitimate variations on the theme of a common humanity"– or in this case, a common EcoVillage identity. (Alexander 2006, cited in Rodriguez Garcia 2010, p. 264). Recall also Bellah's (1995) argument that, in a 'good' community, there will be argument about "the meaning of the shared values *and certainly about how they will be actualized in everyday life*"(p.1, emphasis mine).

Penny told me that when the community was being asked whether they could accept the final proposal, or compromise, to limit the number of outdoor cats to no more than two outdoor cats per neighborhood (see Village Meeting Minutes August 17, 2008), she "stood aside." 'Standing aside' on a proposal means you may not be completely in favor, may even be personally unhappy with it, but you are able to

acknowledge that its probably in the best interest of the community, and you can live with the decision.

However, if she had been more informed about the circumstances in which one can, or should, “block” a decisions, she would have done so – because she now feels that such restrictions – dictating what constitutes a sustainable lifestyle, and disrespecting/ disallowing personal choices and preferences in this regard – stands in opposition to the way she feels the community ought to function. Respect for individual differences, and everyone being allowed to work toward the vision in his or her own way, is a very important value which she would hate to see compromised by community rules, or laws, and restrictions regarding legitimate and sustainable practices.

After this interlude regarding the expression of different opinions and interpretations of, or ways of living-out a shared mission, this chapter will now continue with the issue of expressing different needs in the community.

Disability issues in the community (on being different, continued)

Toby continued: “Sometimes, it almost feels like they don’t want you here if you’re different in ways that are or may be inconvenient to the community. Like, ‘you’re getting in the way of *our* plans again.’ In our society, people of the majority often have little patience with or consideration for what they perceive as ‘special’ requests or ‘special’ requirements, that would allow people with disabilities to participate fully in society. And in this community too, you’ll find that people may feel uncomfortable about any expression of individuality– as in, individual needs to be taken into consideration, by the community, that the rest of the community doesn’t share. Individual needs, such as those based on disability, are often perceived as personal problem, not a societal issue or a problem for the whole community.”

(I noticed that Toby seemed to be mixing a lot of his commentary of ‘disability in U.S. society’ with critique of the way the community/EcoVillage is organized – I asked things like: “Is this EcoVillage you’re talking about now, or U.S. society in general,” or “and do you see this happening at EcoVillage too? The answer would be “both” and “we’re trying to set ourselves apart from ‘mainstream’ society,

but are generally no different when it comes to dealing with differences, specifically those related to disability.”)

Yet, disability is a social construct, Toby explained. Certain physical or mental differences from the ‘norm’ are often only experienced as an impairment or *disability* when society is not built/organized to support or accept them. He gave the example of not being able to walk. It doesn’t need to stand in the way of social participation if all buildings and public transportation were accessible for wheelchairs. Which is not exactly the case at EcoVillage.

Common spaces (e.g. the common house) are wheelchair accessible (and also scent free), but most homes are not. Thus, the people in wheelchair - currently one person in each neighborhood, who became wheelchair dependent after moving to EVI - are unable to visit friends in their homes. When the residents of Song were designing their own homes, they had the option of making it wheelchair accessible, but many chose not to or did not consider this option.

With regard to ‘aging in place’ concerns –what to do if one might require a wheelchair or walker later on in life, many said: “We’ll just make some adjustments to our home if necessary, when the time comes, or move to a different location.” “The structure of my home is not an immediate concern to me personally.” This reflects (U.S.) society’s ‘able-ism’ attitude – different physical needs become invisible or insignificant to the majority who do not experience such difficulties – with the result that the different requirements and slight alterations that would make buildings and such more accessible are not considered, and people with disabilities become unintentionally *excluded* from enjoying full social participation in the community. This happens without there being any negative attitudes on the part of the majority toward these differences.

This accessibility issue – the lack of thought put into making all homes at EcoVillage wheelchair accessible or visit-able for those in wheelchairs, leading to the unintentional exclusion of some members of the Village from many of their friends’ homes - is something which, it must be said, many EcoVillagers regretfully point out. It is not something that only the ones who actually have disabilities have picked-up on (though they may have been the first to point out the significance). It is, at least at this point in time, a widely acknowledged flaw of EcoVillage.

The majority of homes in TREE (the new, third neighborhood) will be accessible or visit-able for people in wheelchairs (accessible, meaning someone in a wheelchair could live there, and visit-able meaning, he/or she can enter, fully access the living room area, and at least one bathroom in the house). The reason that not *all* the homes will be accessible or visit-able is purely logistics – some will be built on a slope, and will be small, split-level homes. An awareness of issues regarding equal access seems to be growing; EVI is taking steps to ensure the inclusion of a more diverse group of people with a broader set of individual needs.

It is not as if Toby and Grace do not appreciate the thought that many EcoVillagers put into accommodating their needs: The signs on the door proclaiming the Song Common House a ‘scent free zone,’ the reminders posted in the laundry room to use only scent free products – simple procedures and standards which most EcoVillagers remember to uphold most of the time, and censor each other in when someone needs to be reminded.

While acknowledging that people in the community have certainly come a long way in becoming more conscious about striving to be inclusive, and some may actually be interested in learning more about what that entails and what is required, Toby and Grace also point out that they too have tried to be very mindful of others, and to not ‘impose their needs’ on (others in) the community.

This fact is often used in their defense to ensure that the requests they do make of the community not be seen as ‘unreasonable.’ “We don’t ask for much. We have already willingly let go of certain expectations, and made concessions. We have accepted the fact that we cannot attend common meals because we can’t expect all cooks to remember or be willing to turn on the fan while cooking the meal for example...” But on some issues, they have to stand their ground and make sure that the desires or plans of other individuals in the community not become a reality that could potential force them out of the neighborhood. An example of such a concern would be the issue of wood-burning stoves/fireplaces at EcoVillage. The following account tells of a distinct clash between individual needs and community desires:

“A hearth is already planned in the TREE common house, but ‘hearth’ is not yet defined. There is a strong desire by many people in TREE to have a highly

efficient wood-burning stove...people from Frog and Song had previously stated they too would love to have a common place to meet around a fire.” (Els, Village Board Meeting November 18, 2010).² The upcoming residents imagined basking in the warm atmospheric glow of a natural fire together, whilst telling stories and ‘creating community.’ The fireplace would foster a soothing sense of ‘togetherness’ and provide warmth, light and comfort to the community through the cold winter days.

Toby and Grace naturally expressed strong concerns against such plans: “We’ve been trying to cope with what is already here. When we came here, there were two families who had already invested \$10k each on wood burning devices. We weren’t going to ask them not to burn. But we did ask for a moratorium (suspension on the addition of new fireplaces) until we were moved in and could assess the level of wood smoke (and how it effected us). We had been told that those devices were so efficient that we would not see nor smell any smoke. That proved not to be the case. We don’t think it’s appropriate or acceptable for the Village to add more” (Toby, Village Board Meeting November 18, 2010). Moreover, “We had to find out about the proposed wood-burning device through the grapevine – even though we (here at the Village) expect residents to check in with their neighbors when they do something that might block a neighbor’s view, and even though it is common knowledge that we have a disability and that we have previously voiced strong opposition to a 3rd wood burning device being added to Song, no-one contacted us.” (Toby, Village Board Meeting November 18, 2010).

It is also not easy to be the other ‘minority,’ –those two households who were at some stage in the process of acquiring a fireplace, as they were designing their home in Song, when Toby and Grace expressed concerns. They now experience themselves as a ‘minority’ who have set themselves apart based on an individual lifestyle choice, and sometimes feel like they are being portrayed negatively by the rest of the group, the majority of EcoVillagers, who have refrained from installing a fireplace out of solidarity for their neighbors’ health concerns.

Toby and Grace also spoke out about the issue of money in the community. Not having an adequate income and unable to seek work, they face much more difficulty paying their monthly bills at EcoVillage. Moreover, certain proposed

² Note: While this was not a Village meeting, the minutes have been made available to the whole Village through the wiki.

projects within the community (e.g. paving the sidewalks in Song) are difficult to actualize, partly and perhaps primarily due to the question: “How are we going to pay for this as a community?” Many believe that each household should be required to contribute the *same amount* (not the same percentage, base on income or other criteria) in dollars. Discussions to “make” richer households pay a little bit more, so that the poorer ones don’t have to offer quite as much are quickly silenced, according to Toby and some other EcoVillagers. “‘Punishing’ richer, hardworking people by making them pay more than others would not seem fair” – several informants pointed to the presence of this attitude toward money in U.S. society and amongst their fellow EcoVillage neighbors. Indeed, I also spoke to one resident about “money in the community”, and “paying for projects,” who expressed these views (about wealthier people being robbed of their sense of freedom to decide how to spend their money, if they were constantly expected to contribute more money to the community than others) as genuine concerns.

To some, equality means everyone should be treated the *same*. But of course, everyone is *not* the same. What happens when there are people who can’t live up to certain expectations, who can’t happily go along with what everyone else is doing, or wants to do, because their needs or abilities are different? (One EcoVillager’s changing perception of ‘equality’ – I dare say, as a result of getting to know Toby and Grace, will be exemplified in the next chapter, on p. 64). First, however, I will continue this discussion on....

Money in the Community

During an interview Bob commented that: “People are very guarded about their money. Always making sure that ‘no-one is getting a better deal’ than them, not even wanting to think about perhaps contributing a little bit more than their neighbor who may be on a much tighter budget, when it comes to paying for community projects...”

However, to some extent, EcoVillage does exemplify alternatives to the dominant view on how one should be paying for things. A more cooperative leaning is apparent. The laundry machines, for instance, are shared- cost is not determined by how often or infrequently one uses them. If everyone was concerned about “fairness” and “no-one getting a better deal” – these machines would pay-by-use, coin-operated.

This distinction between mainstream dominant views on fairness and equality, vs. community contributions and sharing, was discussed during another focus group, in which an outsider to the community was present - a 'mainstream American', if you will, who was staying at one of the bed& breakfast places at EcoVillage for a few days, with no intention of moving to EcoVillage. His questions raised typical outsiders' (to the community) biases and assumption – e.g. “what do you do about privacy? What do you do if people come in with different values?... although that probably doesn't even happen. I assume this place attracts only people who already share the same values to begin with. Is there a selection process? Do people ever get 'booted out?’” And he could not comprehend why the laundry machines were not coin-operated. “What If I had 8 kids and used the laundry machines a lot more than someone living by themselves? Wouldn't I be benefitting off of them?”

On a separate occasion, Frank – Ecovillage resident since 2009 - had commented to me that an anxiety about ending up paying more than your own fair share or having others “leech off of you,” stems from a very individualistic mind-set. At EcoVillage by contrast, it seems natural, and most people seem happy to contribute financially to the community. No one is “keeping tabs” to make sure others aren't getting a better deal out of it. It's the co-operative mindset.

The international co-operative alliance defines cooperatives a.k.a. co-ops, or coops as an “autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.” (I.C.A.2010) According to Franke (2011), board member and resident of the Ecovillage at Ithaca: “Cooperatives offer the best alternative to present-day American capitalism with its destructive practices and harmfully excessive amounts of individualism. Most people in the U.S. have little experience in cooperative undertakings of any kind. Cooperatives can exist in production, consumption or housing.” EVI is a cohousing cooperative. Franke describes several co-op efforts at the Ecovillage – such as a group of eight households which bought, and share use of, a high-tech color photo printer together; the root cellar and community supported agriculture project (CSA), and:

One of EVI's most ambitious cooperative efforts is currently unfolding...Frog is drawing up plans to become its own solar electric co-op ...[using photovoltaic solar panels] to supply 95% to 100% of our electric needs. Financing will come from better-off member households that will jointly attempt to lend up to \$200,000 to the co-op at an interest rate less than that

from a commercial bank, but more than they could get in a regular savings account. Paying back the loan will come from paying our electric bills to the new co-op -...we will also leave open the possibility of a future project to install solar hot water devices either individually or as a jointly-financed solar hot water coop”. Franke (2011) notes that, “creating co-ops at EVI is probably easier than in mainstream communities because here there is already a conscious ethic of cooperation (p. 1).

Thus while some members express a concern about an insufficient sharing ethic at EVI, others have emphasized the cooperative spirit. Moreover, these concerns about money, which were shared with me, are perhaps less easily or openly talked about in the community. (I assume that some EcoVillagers, upon reading the above segments, may be amazed at others’ points of view, or their perceptions of others’ attitudes toward money, and the way it is or should be handled, in the community).

Likewise, whereas some fear exclusion and disrespect for differences in some situations, others see EVI as a very, or maybe even a little too inclusive for its own good. They claim that, “individuality is greatly cherished” – and rather than not knowing how to be inclusive of differences, the problem lies in not being able to overcome them and form more social cohesion. “People know how to be individuals, maintain their individual views and speak up for their rights – forming an intentional community with others, on the other hand, takes practices and a conscious desire to uphold ‘the good of the group’ and keep the community vision in mind as something to strive toward.”

But, as mentioned by a discussant in a Focus Group: “What is the ‘the good of the group?’ How can one person possibly understand, come up with, or define what is in the best interest of everyone in the community? What does this community stand for, ultimately?” Each person brings in a new perspective and a slightly different focus, so that, “the vision of the whole community is continually changing and evolving.” Toby and Grace, for instance, are teaching the community to remain conscious about being inclusive and accommodating differences – to become a model of social sustainability, not just ecological. They are adamant about social justice and equal rights, eager to share their knowledge with the rest of the community and steadfast about bringing these issues to people’s attention. This is how they may contribute to the good, and the growth, of the group.

Can the different knowledge, concerns, and values that individuals bring be respected and accommodated by the rest, to form a unified whole. Unity in diversity – is it possible?

The next chapter may present a hopeful perspective, but first this chapter will continue to illuminate how different types of differences are experienced. The next section, from the same day in the field introduced at the opening of this chapter, reveals the positive integration and effects of different age categories – children and adults – living and working together, side-by-side, in the community. After that, more diversities, and their incorporation into the community will be revealed.

At 4:15pm I went out the door to see what the Cook Team was up to, and if my help would be appreciated. The head cook had not arrived yet, but had left a note with instructions so the assistants could get started. I pulled up a stool and got to work next to Penny, breaking stems off the cilantro.

Age diversity/incorporation in the community

Ana-May, one of the young people, was there and she really wanted to peel the eggs. She likes helping out in the kitchen, as does Emily, the little five or six year old. It's great to see how these kids are immersed in the community. When the head cook, Jane arrived, Emily gave her a big hug, and proudly announced that she made a drawing for her that she wanted to put in her cubby. Jane stroked Emily's hair and talked to her as though the two were closely related. Many feel that the age diversity at EVI significantly enhances the community life.

I turned to Penny, who acknowledged the positive influence of inspiring, adult role models on her children's lives in the community. First, I asked her why she had left California to move to EcoVillage. She told me her story: Ted, her husband was not happy in his corporate job, and he had read a book about Peak Oil – referring to a projected decline in fossil fuel resources, once the 'peak' or maximum daily amount of oil has been extracted, and the need for alternative energy sources or energy savings- which he showed to Penny. They knew they had to change their lives and realized the importance of living in such a way as to preserve the planet for their kids and for future generations. They found out about the EcoVillage at Ithaca through the website, and thought, "wow. That's the kind of place we want to live at!"

Penny and Ted visited the neighborhood, decided to try it out, as a sabbatical for a year, and stayed. “It’s been great.” She loves that her kids get to grow up here and be surrounded by all kinds of people, inspiring role models, who are changing the world in various ways. “No-one can excel in everything – perfect sustainable lifestyle, fighting for social justice, etc., but everyone here is doing something to try and live a ‘good life’ in their own way; to live not only for themselves but as a community. So the kids have not only their parents to look up to as role models but a whole community of people. Everybody brings something to the community.” *Penny*.

However, she was part of a discussion group once, and someone said, the best part about living at EcoVillage is the people, and the hardest part is: the people. Sometimes all the different personalities complement each other, or in some ways they do, and in some ways, or sometimes, it’s a struggle. The primary struggles and advantages of ‘differences in community’ have been highlighted, and this chapter will now continue to express more aspects of diversity, or ‘categories of difference’ and their incorporation into the community.

Divergent status in the community: Renters vs. Home Owners

After dinner, I went to help the dish crew and spoke to Mike. He has been living at EVI for a little over 2 years. He and his wife Aya, from Japan, are renters. He brought that up right away, as if there is a significant distinction between renters at EVI and those who have purchased a home (another renter I interviewed, also began the interview by stating that she was ‘just’ a renter).

Indeed, whenever I asked people about diversity at Ecovillage –one of the diversities listed was often: “renters vs. buyers.” Some of the more permanently settled members of the EcoVillage community look down on, and express generally negative attitudes toward renters: “Because they come and go, disrupting the social fabric of the community, and many are not sufficiently devoted to the ideals that Ecovillage stands for,” some EcoVillagers claim. In this sense, renters become pinpointed as one of the challenges faced in creating a more unified community.

Personally, I did not experience an actual significant difference in the way renters behave and participate in the village vs. the activities of those who purchased their home. Mike for example, was involved on the dish crew, fulfilling the expected work/volunteer hours in the community, and I also saw him at neighborhood meetings

regularly. But being a transitory member of the community myself, I may not have been in a position to truly understand what the fuss, or the distinction between renters and buyers, is about.

Mike said he feels like an observer in the village, but he likes what he sees. He would like to be able to stay, but hasn't felt like really becoming involved, and settling down, because he is not sure how much longer he can stay. Moreover, he doesn't like feeling 'stuck' in one place, and has moved around a lot in his adult years. This village life is similar to their life in Japan. People there are much more community oriented than the average American. Even though they weren't living in an 'intentional community' per se in Japan, people were in general much more intentional about their community. He came here without expectations, and with an open mind. He was not really looking for an intentional community, just a nice place to live, which he has found.

Different Motivations for joining the EVI community

Next, I went to talk to Ellen, an even more recent arrival than Mike. She also feels like she wants to move every four years, but could see herself settling down at Ecovillage. She likes that, living at Ecovillage, she can be as involved, or drawn back as she wants to be, when she wants to be. This space to herself, as an introverted person, is very important to her. "The community accepts all kinds of different people, and there is no pressure to conform or be more involved than you want to be, which is great." She also jokingly expressed that she is not at all a typical EcoVillager.

Me: "How would you describe a typical EcoVillager than?"

Ellen: "Sam!"

Me: "How so, in what sense?"

Ellen: "Well, you know, he's always eager to learn about intentional communities, when he travels he visits other intentional communities and brings back knowledge..."

Me: "Some people just have that sense of mission..."

Ellen: "That's right! And it's not like I don't appreciate what they're doing here. I want to live in an environmentally friendly way too. I think it's great that we're doing that here, and supporting each other in that. It's a great way to live; but it's not my main goal or mission in life. And I feel that that's ok."

Ellen feels very welcomed and accepted in the community, despite not wanting to be involved in the community 24/7, and not feeling a sense of urgency toward the environmental movement or creating more sustainability. It seems to be understood and (generally) accepted within the community that not everyone is going to be as goal/future oriented the some of the most ardent members.

CONCLUSION TO DATA CHAPTERS AND INTRODUCTION TO CONCLUDING CHAPTERS

In their quest to form a community made up of diverse individuals, EcoVillagers have expressed remarkable similarities to the arguments portrayed in the theory chapter.

The first of the data chapters, for instance, primarily focused on the struggles to maintain a sense of unity within the community, and the unanswered desire of some EcoVillagers for people in the community to reach consensus about, and equal levels of motivation and participation toward, common goals or a collective mission. The voices of discontent from within the village resemble the arguments expressed by communitarians.

Just like the communitarians, several EcoVillagers would like to see people “seeking compromise, mutual understanding, and discovery of common ground” rather than “always insisting on their own right” (Walker 1998, p. 26) or “primarily coming to meetings to make sure things get done the way they would like to see them get done,” rather than “actively working toward a common goal” (Wesley and Edward, EcoVillage residents, cited on p. 43 of this thesis).

Others in the village (e.g. Bob, p. 47) expressed the same sentiments as several theorists quoted on page 30 who claim that belonging, or community and inclusion are mutually exclusive. These residents have evidently experienced EcoVillagers as not very open or welcoming toward differences – in opinions, ways of thinking, practices, or needs, and would like to see a greater encouragement of ‘dissent’ and differences, just as Bellah (1995) promotes “argument, even conflict, about the meaning of the shared values and goals, and certainly about how they will be actualized in everyday life” (p. 1) within communities, and Rodriquez Garcia (2010)

envisions “the possibility of mutual criticism and mutual learning across differences” (p.261) in pluralist societies. In the final section of the theory chapter I described the recognition - and attempts at conceptualizing the adaptive integration - of differences within communities and pluralistic societies.

In the final sections of this thesis, I will continue with an argument I was implicitly beginning to develop in the final data chapter, e.g., when alluding to one Ecovillager’s changing perception of ‘equality,’ and that person’s learning from other’s differences.

Toward an Inclusive Community at EcoVillage at Ithaca

At one point in my field research I began to notice that the newer members of the community generally express more positive and enthusiastic images of EcoVillage than the ones who have been here longer – who have often been through frustrations and disappointments in the community. The newer members I spoke to were generally content when it comes to the blend of individual freedom and respect for differences, and the unity and social cohesion they’ve experienced in the community; older members offer more critique on both accounts. Some of the old-time residents have become disillusioned by Ecovillage ineptness at defining, let alone live up to, its main vision as a community, (and?) or have experienced painful restrictions on or disrespect for individual differences.

So I asked myself if this difference in perception of Ecovillage life and struggles, based on the sample of people I spoke to, can be fully attributed to new members lack of experience with any divisive issues and contentious meetings, or if there is an overall changing perception in what this village is about – a new vision that the ones who’ve just moved in are content with, but the original members may have a harder time adapting to? Or the ones offering more critique about a lack of individual freedom and respect for differences, have not yet sufficiently experienced – they still have the old ‘regime’ (for lack of a better word) in mind.

Can it be said that a dominant perception of what Ecovillage stands for – particularly in terms of the need, and efforts made, to be inclusive of differences – is shifting?

I argue that Ecovillage is becoming ever more defined by individual differences – in needs, perspectives, motivations, and priorities. “Defined” can be perceived as: negatively *defined* – confined and constricted by individual differences; neutral – the differences are there, but they do not *define* us or disrupt the unity of EcoVillage in a negative way, for example, some EcoVillagers claim that “there are people of many different religious faiths here, but *we all get along*” – implying that (these) differences aren’t seen as *positively* contributing to the community either.

However, EcoVillage may develop toward an environment where differences are seen as *positively* contributing to the vitality of the community. A place that truly respects and welcomes differences, becomes a defining characteristic of the Ecovillage. (I am not claiming that EcoVillage is or will every become truly diverse – housing a balanced mix of people of different racial and economic backgrounds, but the community is learning and trying to find ways of incorporating, not entirely insignificant, internal differences within a majority white, well-off, neighborhood).

Some of the original EcoVillagers now feel that the village is at a stage where all of these diversities are “watering down” the mission they came here for. Thus they define the differences as *negatively* impacting the common identity and vision of the Village as the following comments made by EcoVillagers attest:

“The good of the group is more important than the individual?
That’s the ideal. But whether that’s the way everybody thinks?”

“What really bothers me is the degree to which it’s just optional how much you feel or want to be connected to the main mission. People all come here for different reasons, and it’s disrupting the vision.”³

³ While this quote (and the interview it came from) expresses one of the initial members’ frustration at the “fuzziness” of the mission, and ‘optional’ aspect of the degree to which one personally identifies with that mission – he also acknowledged that that’s just the way the community is – it’s the culture of Ecovillage – to not seem too radical but remain inclusive of ‘the average Joe’ – to create a comfortable middle-ground and gate-way between middle-class American living and a place that’s truly sustainable, in light of an “emergency planetary situation.”

Whereas newer residents - moved in after 2004 and/or (now) living in the Song neighborhood, often find ways to incorporate differences positively in their ways of defining what EcoVillage is like or about:

“This is a place where diversity is greatly respected. We all come here for different reasons and everyone fits in – like a jigsaw puzzle made up of very different individual pieces.”

“People are very individualistic here. That’s why I fit right in! I’m very individualistic; a non-conformist.”

In the above quote, individualism is taken as a defining characteristic of, and something that unites, EcoVillagers. The long quote below, moreover, describes a positive process of personal change, or “growth” occurring due to an increasing recognition of, and willingness to learn from, individual differences within the community:

On a number of occasions, through honest discussion, listening, workshops, brainstorming and disagreement, many of my assumptions regarding "equality" and "fairness," "illness," "disability," "ageism," "accessibility," representation, consensus, property rights, the environment, etc. have been challenged and dissected. (I thought that "fairness" meant "everyone gets the same thing" rather than everyone gets what they need... that I assumed discrimination is obvious rather than subtle and often unnoticeable; etc.) In the best scenarios, I've been able to let go of some long-held beliefs that were not serving me or my community. As a consequence, I've been able to take clearer stands on issues that formerly may have seemed insignificant to me but which, in truth, speak to my core values of kindness, tolerance, acceptance and inclusion. In this respect, living among people whose convictions about certain issues far exceeds my own is the most significant aspect of living in and working at "community."

It can be said that the data I have gathered, my speculations regarding the Villagers’ changing perceptions toward, and some of their language used in describing, ‘individuality in the community,’ can be matched to Stevenson’s and other theorists’ accounts of a viable/sustainable, inclusive community, as well as Rodriquez- Garcia’s (2010) discussion of ‘interculturalism.’ For instance, in his description of the successful incorporation of diversity in a pluralistic society, Rodriquez-Garcia claimed that, “respect for diversity of all types becomes a central...societal value that unifies citizens” (p. 267). Moreover, successful Interculturalism implies “mutual learning across differences” (p. 261) – as shown

above, both of these values have been expressed by [more recent] EcoVillagers in their definitions of what EcoVillage means to them.

Yet others in the community are clearly voicing the opinion that individuality really isn't being given enough room at all – the community is homogenizing. People are nervous and resentful, not welcoming and respectful of differences – whether in needs, opinions, or perspectives:

‘Consensus’ is the goal. Dissent is loathed. If you have a different opinion or different need from the majority, than that’s your problem. Often times, I have found the community to be not very willing to take different standpoints or needs into consideration.

Such instances or expressions point to the fact that EcoVillage still has a way to go in developing a new culture in which everyone can feel included, yet satisfied that they are able to make a difference in the world by forming a model of sustainable living with each other and the natural environment.

Note that the exemplary quotes provided above are not the sole data on which I am basing my analysis of a possible changing perception of the role and significance of individuality and respect for individual difference at EcoVillage; they are a small sample of the ‘official’ statements, from recorded interviews and email responses, that matched my hunch – based on recollections of casual conversations and observations - about a disparity of visions between old time residents and new comers.

Further support for this idea, of a different culture perhaps developing over the years -toward a community in which shared values and vision, collective goals, and community expectations, are more loosely defined, and it becomes more important to respect and uphold individual freedom and differences- possibly due to the significant and rapid expansion from one neighborhood of 30 households, doubling in size over a span of a few months as residents of the second neighborhood moved in in 2003, and now again facing significant rapid expansion with the addition of TREE - comes from placing my own findings, based on research done in January-March 2011, in the line of prior student research done at EcoVillage – and comparing each account and the tensions the respective researchers, were able to observe or chose to focus on.

Andy Kirby (2004) based his analysis on close contact with EVI from 2000-2004, document analysis from the earlier years, and on-site field research during 2003 (Kirby 2004, p. 1). In his accounts, shared values and vision, defining guidelines for interacting and appropriate behavior, etc. seem to have played a much clearer and more prominent role in the community. For example:

“The Establishment of guiding principles and community norms and regulations is recognized as an important part of the development of the Eco Village as residents work toward realizing the day-to-day details of the vision” (Kirby 2004, p. 134).

Compare this to Breton (2009), another student researcher’s, more critical accounts of EcoVillage’s inhibitions at achieving its primary vision, due to a lack of social control and unity in purpose, for example:

...”The, values and behavior of certain members were not sufficiently aligned with the mission or culture.... A lack of shared vision of sustainability... blurs and slows down the consensus decisions-making process, which in turn delays the attainment of organizational goals and objectives (p. 146).

Two years after Breton (2009), I (Holleman 2011) observed a more laid-back, less concerned attitude toward the ‘lack of shared vision’ developing, specifically among the newer generation of EcoVillagers – who often perceive this lack of absoluteness regarding shared vision as a liberating, defining feature of EcoVillage – something to be treasured and striven for, for example:

“I love that each individual is free to participate in the community and contribute to the mission at the level he or she is most comfortable. There is no pressure. So everyone feels welcome and included as they are.”

The reality of the diversity in the degree to which individuals in the community are committed to a shared vision, collective goals, etc. - which seemed to be less apparent in the earlier years of EcoVillage, described by Kirby- but which Breton in 2009 began to describe as a problematic feature of the EVI community, in terms of EcoVillage furthering its own mission, can still be observed today, but, in my eyes, may be perceived, as less problematic, especially by the new-comers, to the community.

However, this perceived ‘evolution’ of the village’s dilemmas over time may also be partly due to the respective researchers at the time, and the issues of particular interest to them. Had Breton conducted her research in 2004, she, with her personal

visions and expectations of what an Ecovillage stands for, may have been just as critical about a perceived lack of unity in the Village. Would Andy Kirby, perhaps less personally drawn to the Ecovillage ideals, in 2009, have noticed the same tensions that Breton described?

Breton conducted field research for her MA thesis in Environmental studies, titled: *Organizing for sustainability at a small scale: A case Study of an Ecovillage in 2009*. She bases her findings on one and a half months of field research at Ecovillage, starting with participant observation and field notes, which led to 21 semi-structured interviews with key informants. Document analysis was conducted before, during and after the research period. Through the framework of Organizational Theory, she looks specifically at the internal organization of the Ecovillage. (See Breton, p. 48, quoted on page 42 of this thesis).

In this regard, she perceives the EcoVillage as an organization, of which she is the judge, assessing its effectiveness at accomplishing its tasks/goal (and she defines that goal almost solely on its environmental mission). Her thesis provides an account of what EcoVillage is doing, and how it is failing, to reach its goals of providing a model of sustainability for the 21st century. Ecovillage, in her opinion, is too broad and inclusive to fully realize collective effort toward a better future.

This conclusion stands in opposition to Chitewere (2006) who argued along the line that *exclusion* of some people, who cannot afford to be 'green' at Ecovillage, is disrupting its visions of creating a truly sustainable (both socially and ecologically) environment. Her thesis claimed that, at EVI, "there is no effort to challenge the housing market to provide affordable housing to low-income families, but rather to create a green lifestyle within the boundaries of U.S. middle and upper-class expectations" (p. 317).

"A green lifestyle privileges wealthy families who can enjoy the luxury of being green: afford organic food, afford to live 'close' to nature, and to drive alternative vehicles without needing to sacrifice" (p.308).

"How will Ecovillages improve our environments or model sustainable living if they exclude such cultural realities as poverty, inequality, and racism, especially because these realities are often related?" (p.242).

Chitewere, a Zimbabwean graduate student wrote her Ph. D. Dissertation in Anthropology titled: *Constructing a Green Lifestyle: Consumption and*

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University State University of New York. Experiencing herself as an ethnic minority within the community, and recognizing that she would not be able to afford to live in the community, perhaps made her more attuned to, and determined to highlight, the experience of ‘exclusion’ inherent in the green life-style.

Yet, by the time I entered the community, in 2011, I experienced a significant amount of discussion and thought around issues of equality, affordability and accessibility in the community, gradually replacing the perceived ignorance of privileges or “unwillingness to question...the status quo” described by Chitewere (p. 321).

It seems as though, perhaps since the publication of Chitewere’s thesis, renewed (though not entirely new or unique in the history of the community⁴) emphasis has been placed on promoting affordable housing options at Ecovillage. For instance, ‘affordability’ is repeatedly emphasized in TREE’s (the upcoming third neighborhood at EVI) vision statement (available at ecovillageatithaca.org). During many lively and lengthy ‘TREE meetings’, I witnessed the group’s substantial efforts, and struggles, to maintain the vision and goals of affordability (as well as the equally strong values of accessibility and sustainability – thus promoting economic inclusion and the inclusion of differently-abled people within an ecologically sustainable environment).

As indicated, different researchers, who conducted their research at EVI at different points in time, have come up with varying arguments, yet, the degree to which personality vs. timing were at work in shaping the data each respective researcher noticed, collected and analyzed is up for speculation. One cannot rely on an analysis of one type of data – such as a comparative literature review of prior researchers’

⁴ I have been told that originally, the Song neighborhood was intended to provide small, more affordable housing units at EVI (see also Walker 2005, p. 210, and Chitewere 2006, p. 284), but in the end, paying off the land-debt turned out to be the top priority in the construction of the Second neighborhood, and thus the homes become larger and even more expensive, on average, than Frog homes (see also Chitewere 2006, p. 283). Throughout EcoVillage history, and up to the present, some EcoVillagers, including the co-founder, have expressed a strong desire for, and considered ways to promote, economic diversity and inclusion at EVI (e.g. Walker 2005, p. 210). Others claimed that EVI is/was not intended to be an economically diverse place, but rather cater primarily to the American middle-class, the prime consumers of energy and resources and contributors of greenhouse gases, so as to show that it is possible to live a comfortable middle-class lifestyle while reducing one’s ecological footprint. Thus, there have been and are different visions about the need to work toward economic diversity, and various efforts and attitudes toward that goal.

findings – alone to analyze a particular social phenomenon. But these data plus my own speculations regarding the differing views and perspectives of old-time residents vs. new-comers, might provide valuable insight into a phenomenon – the development of a new perspective regarding the role of the individual, and social significance of (welcoming) differences or ‘diversity’ in the community.

CONCLUSION

After introducing my research setting, subject(s), and methodology, this thesis began with a theory chapter, in which we looked at the themes of individualism and community at the national level in the United States of America. In the proceeding data chapters, I revealed the same tensions played out on the community level at the EcoVillage at Ithaca.

The main tension, on all levels, has been the effort to define the role of, and find a way to better integrate, individuals and their differences – a.k.a. ‘individuality’ within communities – whether these be defined as nations or neighborhoods.

U.S. society and ideologies are neither completely individualistic, nor solely or successfully ‘united’ or communitarian. Nor is the population of the EcoVillage at Ithaca completely homogenous and effortlessly striving toward the same vision. Individuality is honored, while community is likewise desired. And thus the aim is to give voice to, and find a way to integrate, both visions.

“A nation [or community] that brings people together, creating a ‘we’ but which enables these same persons to [be] themselves and recognize one another in and through their differences as well as what they share in common – this...is the great challenge” (Elsthain & Beem 2002, p. 37).

The data I have gathered have reflected how this ‘we’ is created, and the challenges encountered in defining this shared identity. Moreover, I have sought to express the extent to which ‘these same persons’ are enabled to be themselves and the extent to which their individual differences are recognized and supported in the community, including the specific challenges faced in this regard.

Interpretations of the role played by individual differences in the formation of ‘communities’ differ. Some say the profuse acknowledgement of, or emphasis on ‘individuality’ - or the constant highlighting of differences, in the form of claiming ‘rights’ based on said differences - disrupts the unity of a community and thus its ability to accomplish its goals and live up to its vision. Many claim that a ‘hyper-inclusivity’ further waters down the mission by creating disparity within the group (Breton, 2006; Edward, EcoVillage resident, and others). Such opinions have been expressed, for instance, by communitarians, and have also been voiced by several EcoVillagers – primarily those belonging to the initial group of residents, it seems. Further concerns have been expressed with regard to the lack of common understanding of the community’s main mission, values, and goals. This dilemma troubles the nation, according to Bellah (1995, p. 3), as well as the EcoVillage.

Others attest that the ‘claiming of right’ by minorities, demanding to be fully included within a particular community is a form of ‘widening the boundaries’ of said communities. They (e.g. Stevenson 2002) perceive a movement toward a new definition of community –one in which there is room for individuality and diversity. (Acknowledging) differences can be seen as contributing to the strength and vitality of a community, rather than primarily disrupting its unity.

On the national level too, there are strong advocates for the creation of “more encompassing” rather than exclusive (national) identities (Putnam 2007, p. 139; Rodriquez-Garcia 2010), for the vitality of the nation. Rodriquez-Garcia, for example, defines Interculturalism as “the interactive process of living together in diversity with the full participation of... and social exchange between all members of society beyond that of mere recognition and coexistence, in turn forming a cohesive and plural...community” (p. 260). He describes the “respect for diversity of all types [as becoming] a central...societal value that unifies citizens” (p. 267).

It can be said that individuals at EcoVillage, through their differences or persistent struggles for recognition and ‘equitable accommodation’ are instrumental in teaching each other about being mindful and inclusive of differences within the community. Indeed, many individuals at EcoVillage now perceive such an inclusive environment as a vital and defining characteristic of the community that is the Ecovillage at Ithaca. This is one example of the ways in which individual differences can contribute to and

shape the community's development in a positive direction. While in no way perfected at the Ecovillage at Ithaca, unity in diversity may indeed be possible, in the establishment of a sustainable community for the future.

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