

# Community How To



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## **I Introduction**

Since the beginning of Fall 2009, I have lived in the Lorax Manner. The name implies our devotion to living in a sustainable way and appreciation for Dr. Seuss's environmentally themed book *The Lorax*. A student housing cooperative located in Eugene, Oregon, The Lorax Manner has vegan community meals cooked regularly by members, benefit shows for various organizations, events like yoga and art shows put on by individuals, local organic food bought collectively in bulk, weekly jobs, music circles, good conversations, kitchen dance parties, and more. We practice non-hierarchical consensus based decision making, that is, all members share equal power: We have one vote, veto power, and the ability to propose events, changes to policy, and money expenditures. The individual has a lot of sway, but people who live here know a vote is made with the community in mind, not purely for themselves. While the Lorax Manner remains a welcome introduction to community living and a positive learning experience, it is not a utopia: Tensions can run high, people miss their jobs, there's unspoken anger and gossip over personal actions, members avoid directly confronting issues, some hardly participate at all in conversation and activities. Needless to say, sometimes people question how strong our community is.

Solving problems has always interested me and so I wanted to find out how to build a stronger community and fix the issues noted. I began asking questions: What does a stable community look like? What are our organizational problem? Given these new tasks, would the usefulness of this job increase? How do individual emotions influence the community as a whole? Between personal experience and research I found a series of factors influencing the emotional and organizational stability of a diverse array of communities. Culture, personal upbringing, the activities and events performed by the community, values, governmental organization, diversity, and relative proximity between community members all play a role in the emotional state and stability of a community. This essay relates directly to intentional communities with people living close together, but in many ways applies to other communities as well. These include neighborhoods, towns, sports teams, businesses, and classrooms.

A broad array of definitions exist for the term "community." For the purpose of this overview, I will base the definition on the theory of "Psychological Sense of Community" composed by McMillan and Chavis in 1986 (Wright). They state that "sense of community is a feeling that members have a belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together." McMillan and Chavis believe in four governing factors of creating community. These include "membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection."

## **II Sense of community**

### **A Membership**

The membership process creates a group of people that can relate to a shared culture, and rejects those who don't understand or refuse participation in it. This commonality between members is created through "boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, and a common symbol system" (Wright).

### **i Boundaries**

According to Dr. Stephen Wright's doctoral dissertation on Community, "Boundaries' are marked by such things as language, dress, and ritual, indicating who belongs and who does not" (Wright

### 1. Membership).

Example:

In the Lorax Manner, our dress usually consists of patched or homemade clothing, our language uses shared terms such as “sparkle fingers” and “Loraxed,” and our rituals include weekly meetings and the annual Pink Party and the Ally Bizarre. These characteristics create a culture members identify with and outsiders might or might not see they fit into.

### ii Emotional Safety

One must feel a sense of security in home and around community members. The ability to speak emotions openly on any subject matter and express oneself freely.

Example:

Someone who shares touchy subject matter should not fear it turning into gossip. Someone who states an opinion should not be attacked. Confrontational or violent communication should never be used to get a point across.

### iii A Sense of Belonging and Identification

“Expectation or faith that I will belong, and acceptance by the community.”

Example:

Members are usually friendly and respectful to one another. Differences in opinion and culture are discussed with an open mind, understanding everyone sees the world differently.

### iv Personal Investment

Each member should have a desire to be with and work for the community.

Example:

You socialize in the common areas often and organize or participate in activities put on by community members.

### v A Common Symbol System

According to McMillam and Chavis, “Understanding common symbol systems is a prerequisite to understanding community.... Groups use symbols such as rituals, ceremonies, rites of passage, forms of speech, and dress to indicate boundaries of who is or is not a member.”

Example:

The symbols that define the Lorax Manner's “Boundaries” from a previous section of this paper all apply here. Some others include heartarchy, anarchy, twin trees, unicorns, money, organic food, standing aside, down twinkles, the rooftop, the sun, rats, parties, bike wheels, cops, and Dr. Suess's *The Lorax*. This list includes nonverbal language, inside jokes, common activities, and in general, symbols everyone in the house is familiar with though not necessarily part of.

### vi “Membership” with Religious Communities

According to the government hosted *The Amana Colonies* website, religious intentional communities usually last longer than do secular ones (Utopias). Why? Religious intentional communities have a strong shared belief that establishes their daily actions, values, ethics, and morals. As everyone shares a common knowledge of how people should act and individual roles, members of the community can more easily make decisions or correct poor behavior without running into serious arguments of right and wrong. Religious groups also have rituals, ceremonies, and meetings required of

all members for their spiritual well-being. As noted later in the “Shared Emotional Connection” section, teamwork and friendship are created through performing activities together, so a very strong connection is built from a religious community's many shared experiences.

### **B Influence**

The second part of McMillan and Chavis' Sense of Community is “influence” (Wright 2. Influence). They assert that for a member to feel part of the community the individual must have power to influence the community and simultaneously the community must have power to influence the individual. This means that the individual feels empowered to change the community, but rules also govern how that individual can act within the community.

Example:

In the Lorax Manner Student Cooperative, anyone can propose policy changes, paint murals, or hold events, but as community members we have to finish our house jobs, help do security for benefit shows, and respect the privacy of our housemates. Our jobs require us to spend a certain amount of time in the house's common areas we might not otherwise, thus increasing potential interaction between members. Some jobs like cleaning areas of the house give a further sense of belonging by making people care about what happens to that area. They are no longer responsible for just themselves, but for everyone that interacts with that area, and everyone that interacts with that area influences how much time they must spend cleaning. Having power to change our environment, we feel it is ours rather than the founders'. Obligated to abide by policies, we feel we are part of something.

### **C Integration and Fulfillment of Needs**

Next, the “integration and fulfillment of needs.” McMillam and Chivas actually use “need” in terms of something that is “desired and valued” rather than a necessity of life such as food or water (Wright 3. Integration and Fulfillment of Needs). The authors assert that if rewarded for performing positive actions in the community, an individual will feel a stronger bond to the community. This works just like positive reinforcement; people give you compliments and you feel better about your work and yourself, and probably feel compelled or willing to do something similar in the future. That, or you find similar positive actions to perform for the community.

Example:

As an active member of the Lorax Manner, I really appreciate the positive comments given for organizing outings to a local farm, or holding “What the Fuck Am I Doing With My Life?” meetings. Even when I feel discouraged when events are under attended, the compliments I get for trying makes me want to keep organizing them. It's great to have people acknowledging that they like what you're doing.

### **D Shared Emotional Connection**

Lastly, McMillam and Chavis state community needs to create a “shared emotional connection” and suggest a number of ways to accomplish this (Wright 4. Shared Emotional Connection). These include having “meaningful” social time, ensuring activities and conversations have a definitive ending, experiencing and getting through difficult times together, putting energy into making the community a

better place, rewarding people who positively influence the community, and also, although difficult to definitively say how, creating a “spiritual bond” between members. Many of these are subject to opinion, but I will try to relate them to my experiences in the the student cooperatives.

### **i Meaningful Social Time**

Anyone can help facilitate the development of community by starting a conversation or getting people to do an activity. As more of these connections are made, a community dynamic forms.

Example:

For me, the most “meaningful” social time is either one-on-one conversations or group activities like riding bikes, sharing skills, or cooking together while having conversations that allows the participants to relate to one another. Others prefer bars and movies. It's all relative.

### **a Team Cognitive Research Group Activities**

In an analysis of “team cognitive research”, or the shared experiences and knowledge that a group of people has, researchers found that higher levels of “team cognition” lead to shared behavioral experiences as well as boosts in motivation and performance (DeChurch 32).

Example:

According to a member of an Argentinian housing cooperative, “Doing (construction) work together was useful, more than anything, because it made us become 'compinches' [buddies], even more than friends. We could laugh together, tease one another. Doing this work helped us 'convivir' [live together], generate the solidarity connections we talk about, no? That's what it was useful for” (Procupez 332). Friendship for the Argentinian cooperative did not form simply by living closely together, it formed through group activity. They learned each others' quirks and pasts, and how to rely on each other.

I speculate the construction work did not include the whole community though, and so they required more activities to allow everyone the opportunity to create friendly community connections. The Lorax Manner shares this characteristic. We bring people together through parties, movies, cooking breakfast, weekly meetings, hot springs trips, and more. These activities can take a lot of energy to put on, but it can also provide happy memories and create a positive experience for everyone.

### **b Perception of Crowding and the Dunbar Number**

Comfort with social time can be hampered by the influence of crowding. A sense of crowding can have a number of negative impacts on the psyche including creating social withdrawal as a reaction to needing alone time or silence (Degliantoni 10-11). If people do not feel willing to interact, a huge blockade is immediately created in forming community. Robin Dunbar theorized the “Dunbar Number” which says that “there is a cognitive limit to the number of individuals with whom any one person can maintain stable relationships... [and] in turn limits group size...” (Allen). Based on “census data from various village and tribe sizes in many cultures” the number roughly equates to 150 people. According to Christopher Allen, a network theorist, this upper margin only exists with a great amount of time spent socializing and building bonds between members. Otherwise the number drastically decreases to about 50 persons. When the crowding threshold breaks, relationships destabilize, social withdrawal spreads, and people begin taking each other for granted.

Example:

I've heard a number of travelers say that in bigger housing cooperatives in California there

resides so many people that many don't know or hardly ever see a third or more of those living there. This in turn limits the community potential, as you have a lot of members unaware of happenings or not participating in the decision making process. Furthermore, if the community is not communicating, awareness of individual problems that members or a counselor might be able to help resolve is greatly slowed or completely removed.

In the Lorax Manner, our 26 members have fairly stable relationships and respect one another, though that varies between individuals giving a quick “Hello” when seeing one member to having long conversations and hugs each day with another. More housemates means a bigger time commitment for developing strong friendships with everyone. As a secular student cooperative we do not have an activity everyone enjoys and have very different schedules from one another, and in this sense may be too diverse for complete community cohesiveness. The deeper connections are usually formed between those members belonging to cliques. These cliques act to create a shared ideological and cultural grouping that focus the members' social time. In a relatively diverse household it's not realistic to be close with everyone, so for some the cliques are important in making meaningful friendships.

## **ii Experiencing Difficult Situations**

Difficult situations are frustrating, can end friendships, and even result in community members feeling so distanced that they move out (Wright 4. Shared Emotional Connection). That said, they help a group grow structurally and emotionally.

Example:

We once had a member in the Lorax Manner who almost never showed his face, missed most of the weekly meetings and some of his jobs as well. These actions resulted in a review of our housemate's membership. No one was really prepared for the review on an emotional or policy level. For whatever reason, there was a push to get the topic over with, to trust every vague statement our housemate said, forgive, and then drop it. We never completed the full membership review, and afterward many people felt unsatisfied with what had happened, but had felt too shy speaking over those adamant about ending the process. The problems with our housemate did subside slightly, but were still present with missed jobs and a lack of presence in the community. We finally called another membership review after many attempts to address these problems.

The first membership review taught us to know the specific written policies and follow through fully once incited. We learned the processes of dealing with problems detrimental to the community. Everyone learned about what it means to be a community member, contrasting those who participated and this member who did not. That in turn gave our membership team ideas for new questions in the membership application to act as warning signs against non-participatory types. At the end of this awkward and difficult situation, our housemate decided to give us his 30 days notice instead of going to the second membership meeting.

## **iii Conclude Discussions**

Conversations started should be concluded out of respect and interest of the subject.

Example:

The social atmosphere of the Lorax Manner can make concluding discussions difficult. With so many people living together, new voices are constantly entering and leaving the room, not to mention distractions from music playing or someone riding their bicycle around in circles. While it can make for an interesting day, I sometimes I find these habits frustrating and debilitating to making strong

friendships. A conversation that keeps to a specific subject area and has conclusion creates potential for participants to grow, learn, and better understand their peers. A conversation cut short or hijacked by a new subject area cuts this potential down, and can create negative feelings.

#### **iv Putting energy into making the community a better place**

Self explanatory.

Example:

People have painted murals on the walls to make our house look better, held workshops to expand knowledge on social issues or personal hobbies, rewritten policies for clarity, and much more. It's always great when people feel compelled to help the community grow, perhaps because it the community a new, refreshing feeling.

#### **v Rewarding people who positively influence the community**

The act of rewarding behaviors you appreciate in the community makes it more likely those behaviors will happen. The behavior may even be performed by someone else either from the an positively reinforce behavior you appreciate in the community.

Example:

Giving a thank you, a hug, a letter of kind words, a song, or some sort of gift.

#### **vi Spirit**

I cannot say knowing the spirit of a community in the Lorax Manner. I suspect it is a phenomenon that happens with great amounts of social time and experiences shared between members over a long period of time. Perhaps because the Lorax Manner is a transient community with four or more people moving out per school quarter, and up to fifty percent turn over between academic years it makes a spiritual bond difficult. This paired with our dissimilar values and interests might cut out the experiences or time spent together required of a spiritual bond. On the other hand, I am uncertain of perspectives other than my own regarding the spirit.

### **III Communication**

#### **A Written vs. Verbal**

According to a series of studies people “hear” e-mail messages differently than the sender does (Kruger 1). Although this study specifically used e-mail communication, I believe the conclusions can be applied to handwritten messages as well due to their commonality of lacking verbal language. The writer “perceives” the message to have the tone of their emotional state, but the reader fails transcribing the words into those emotions, and so misinterpretation occurs.

With consideration that a choice between speaking to a person and writing them exists, we find two implications. First with the issue of time, the reception and response of messages slows down. As a result, issues take longer to resolve and the reader potentially skews the meaning. Second, using messages to resolve difficult situations can create an awkward sensation on both parties when resuming normal communication, even if through the messages the issue is resolved.

Example:

A number of my friends, and myself included, have used email or written messages to resolve

problems. Either great uncertainty exists in how to respond emotionally after asserting yourself in a written emotional form, or the delayed response provides uncertainty and even paranoia over what response will come. While indirect communication can be useful in getting words out that would otherwise not, the best method of solving problems in my experiences is verbally, face to face.

Another example is with unsigned, passive aggressive messages that occasionally appear on our community board. Sometimes I find them justified, such as in the case when a toilet is left unplugged, or a sink becomes clogged because of water balloons. Other times, the messages are obvious misunderstandings, and because the writer is anonymous, they cannot be confronted. When living in a household where people interpret meanings differently, or are uneducated in the house's policies, ideas of what is right can clash. My only advice in these situations is to avoid judgment until you know the reason behind what is bothering you. In the case of misunderstandings, or where the culprit was unaware of wrongdoing, the messages create hurt feelings and tension in the community. Emergencies happen, and some people live with different lifestyles than your own. Open mindedness is essential in the community.

### **B “Bad Apples”**

William Felps has studied “bad apples,” people in workplaces whose negative output bring down everyone's mood and productivity (Gardner). When these people leave, almost immediately the mood lightens and productivity increases.

Example:

I've noticed within the student co-ops that negative energy displayed long term from an individual not only creates gossip, but also puts at least one or more people in really terrible moods when the negative individual is around. Communication breaks down, people hang out less, and in general it ripples through the whole community from small to serious ways. Even short term, such as if a person doesn't acknowledge your presence in the morning, it might start a bad day. You realize the difference if one morning you're ignored and another you're talking with a group of people cooking breakfast in the kitchen. One positive experience can make a world of difference in a person's day. Thus the individual has a responsibility to be respectful, and in doing so allows for a better community dynamic to form.

### **C Non Violent Communication**

Even a highly cohesive community will experience negative moments. In these situations, reattaining community togetherness and personal happiness comes with proper communication. We often talk about the passiveness or passive aggressiveness of people to certain issues in the Lorax Manner. Emotional detachment or gossip manifests much easier than direct confrontation or working to resolve the issue. These acts neither help the community nor help yourself, they rather make situations grow into larger and larger problems. Writing an angry note on our white board without signing it is one example in the Lorax Manner of this passive aggressive behavior.

Ann Garrido and Sheila Heen work in community studies and recognize that regardless of a person's beliefs, everyone runs into interpersonal conflicts (Garrido 15). In fear or humiliation of confronting a problem, violent communication or passiveness can manifest from internalized emotions. Garrido and Heen have worked on methods to use nonviolent communication to solve these types of conflicts. They believe that openness about your internal feelings, discussion with all involved parties, and personal accountability for your part of the conflict are key in peacefully resolving a dispute (16-

17). A community member must understand how everyone reaches their personal happiness and make reasonable sacrifices of their independence to accommodate them. This goes both ways, so people find happiness and help others find happiness while retaining their core personality.

Example:

In the Lorax Manner sexist or homophobic remarks are strongly frowned upon by certain members, and their reactions find division between passive aggressiveness and informing individuals of their prejudiced words. The later functions to create a community of learning and establishes a space where all feel welcome. It might boil down to telling the offender, "I appreciate that you want to make people laugh, but please don't disrespect my identity." More often than not, the offender is unaware that their words have that sort of hurtful message to people. Through new awareness we grow to accommodate more cultures, but it can be difficult to change, especially with a form of communication like gossip that has both a good and bad side.

### **D Gossip**

In "Beyond Home: Forging the Domestic in Shared Housing," Valeria Procupez gives a research account of interpersonal relationships in a cooperative house, analyzing constructive and destructive gossip (Procupez 339). Procupez argues that gossiping prevents the internalizing of feelings. It permits the observation and critical analysis of problems before addressing them in front of the whole community. Of course, gossip can also create a hurtful atmosphere for the person or people it relates to, in turn forming a distance between members of the community and their hurt ego.

Example:

In our community, some gossip takes the form of relating mishaps, relationships, and passive aggressiveness. I have witnessed gossip as beneficial, but also rude or uncalled for. If people gossip about a person missing their jobs for so and so reason, we can together devise a solution and if necessary bring it up in a meeting. On the other hand, if people gossip about someone becoming really drunk and embarrassing themselves, this just perpetuates their embarrassment and does not help the community at all. Gossip can be beneficial or detrimental, but stopping the bad might take some serious rethinking of how some socialize. Another possible problem arises in communication when your group consists of all similar-minded people.

### **E Groupthink**

Groupthink, the act of a homogenous group forming decisions less developed and rational than another unspoken possibility, creates one problem a really cohesive community may encounter. However, debate exists about the research done on groupthink (Callaway 157). Some of the original research done by Irving Janis in the 1970s, while extensive, cannot be duplicated. Nonetheless, I think having limited solutions suggested to solve a problem would logically result from group homogeneity. One remedy might entail ensuring acceptance of a diverse array of peoples, including minorities. Those voices would also need to feel empowered to speak. Keep in mind that this diversity needs to be balanced with a common group interest as mentioned earlier.

Example:

Sometimes in our meetings when a proposal seems to have reached consensus, one individual will speak against it, and several others will suddenly change their opinions and speak against the proposal as well. While it extends our meeting times, the unthought of opinion benefits our community by creating an awareness of differences in culture, values, and beliefs and potentially creates a stronger, reworked proposal. Every seemingly small factor creates large differences in the stability of the

community.

#### **IV Forming a Community**

Many resources exist for forming a community. There are housing grants available, cooperative grocers to buy into, and probably projects already underway where you live. Here are some good places to start:

<http://www.nasco.coop/>

The North American Students of Cooperation homepage, helping create, network, and expand student housing cooperatives.

<http://sites.google.com/site/scawiki/>

The Student Cooperative Association wiki page. Based in Eugene, Oregon, has the policies, history, job descriptions, ideas, and more from the three student cooperatives it runs.

You.

The largest resource is your own determination. Set up a meeting. Hand out flyers. Ask your neighbors if they would tear down their fences to create a shared garden. Have a potluck. Remember, the most important thing is working together and sharing experiences, so have fun with it.

#### **V Conclusion**

All together, McMillan and Chavis' "sense of community" is attainable only when individuals allow their minds to be open and reliant on others. The interdependence that forms afterward has great possibilities in helping one live resourcefully and happily. There are, however, variables that keep the community stable and functional. Culture, personality, community structure, and much more can change the potential for group cohesion. Community, most of all, is a growing experience. It does not require a person to fit an exact role coming in. New members can be secular, religious, shy, outgoing, or any race or ethnicity and still find acceptance if they are willing to try. I strongly encourage anyone willing to seek out a community to join or to create their own. At the very least, you will understand a different way of life, working together with many people in friendship and mutual trust.

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## VII Contact Info

Have questions? Arguments? Insights? Email me at Sage3639@hotmail.com