

“Re-Inventing How We Live in the City”: Well-being and the Los Angeles Ecovillage

Journal of Contemporary Ethnography

1–24

© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/08912416241262758

journals.sagepub.com/home/jceDani X. Knoll¹ 

Abstract

In this study I examine the ritualistic behavior of participants in the intentional community where I live, the Los Angeles Ecovillage, and how that relates to well-being in a collective sense. Studying the ritualistic behavior within the Los Angeles Ecovillage can offer insight into areas that have been perhaps less explored, as in ritual's relationship to well-being in intentional communities, particularly in the urban context of this community. Furthermore, although it is a factor, psychological well-being in this context is not limited to an individual's self-reported quality of mental and physical health—it arguably extends to a collective expression of well-being. In describing social alternative approaches to health and well-being related problems posed by societal barriers to human connection, a paradigm may be formed for how intentional community can support psychological needs.

Keywords

intentional community, ritual, well-being, self-determination

¹University of California Irvine, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Dani X. Knoll, University of California Irvine, 117 Bimini Place, Los Angeles, CA 90004, USA.

Emails: knolld@uci.edu; hihiknoll@gmail.com

Introduction

In the hallway of my apartment building, as I am headed to the grocery store, I run into my neighbor. She says “Hi!” to me and I say “Hi” back and ask, “How have you been?” As we both happen to have time, this then turns into an hour-long conversation that ranges from what happened to her that day to how work has been for me lately to how she is feeling better about her family life right now. In no other apartment building I have lived in have I ever known my neighbors well enough to *stop* and say hello in the hallway, much less have an hour-long conversation that delves into our personal lives. But this is not an irregular occurrence where I live, because I live in a place where everyone knows their neighbors, often with years if not decades of experience living next to each other. Thus, a context is made where the profane, or mundane and everyday happenings, becomes sacred, that which is beyond the ordinary (Durkheim 2008). In intentionally living with my neighbors such that we would know each other well enough to stop and chat, that this could even be considered a remarkable event. . . is at once testament to a pervasive loneliness in society *and* the willingness to salvage oneself from that alienated state.

I live at the Los Angeles Ecovillage, the placename for an intentional community that has existed since the 1990s in the Rampart Village neighborhood of Los Angeles, CA. Intentional communities, encompassing thousands of people around the world, are groups of people intentionally coming together for a common project where there is an adoption of living conditions in accord with that project and typically in contrast to the prevailing conditions of mainstream society (Lallement 2022). In the case of the Los Angeles Ecovillage, which operates under a limited equity housing cooperative nonprofit called Urban Soil/Tierra Urbana, the intention behind the project, as the community website’s subtitle says, “Re-inventing How We Live in the City,” is to live ecologically in community together as a demonstration of what is possible in the city (Los Angeles Eco-Village 2024a). The way in which this “living together in community” is manifested interests me as someone who cares about my neighbors. Having benefited from living at the Ecovillage for nine years at the time of writing, I would also like more people to have the opportunity from community to find friends, family, and mutual support in their lives.

An ethnographic approach can describe the nuances of community life in how it relates to well-being, not only in terms of mental and physical health, but as a well-being embodied structurally in collective intention. Well-being will be examined here in what is considered conducive to that well-being by interlocutor community members, in conjunction with participant observation of the collective behaviors of the community. Within the two apartment buildings the community inhabits, I have met all (at present approximately

fifty) of my neighbors and fellow community members. From composting to potlucks and community meetings, this experience has often been a process involving very specific and ordered behaviors which, based on the work's bibliography, I characterize as ritualistic. I will explore who the Los Angeles Ecovillagers are, the ritualistic behaviors reflective of the community, and how that behavior relates to a sense of psychological well-being in the components that make up its collective context. Ultimately, this will be done to address the primary objective of this research: to describe social alternative approaches for the health and well-being related problems posed by societal barriers to human connection.

According to the bibliography compiled by Kunze and Avelino (2017) on behalf of the Global Ecovillage Network, a preponderance of research has been done on ecovillages and their social innovations. Notably, in a literature review on ecovillages, Felix Wagner found argumentation that while ecovillages in the urban setting cannot in themselves act as prototypes for transforming the entirety of industrial society's paradigm, they can provide a model for sustainable solutions at a more localized scale (Wagner 2012). Wagner also found economic studies to be near nonexistent, revealing a gap in the literature on ecovillages that could be addressed in part by focusing on how cooperative living can reduce the cost of housing. It has been argued that there are fundamental psychological needs, of which competence, autonomy, and a relatedness are a part, for people's sense of well-being to be supported (Ryan and Deci 2000), and community is a space where people can interact with each other in self-determination over time to meet said needs. As Rubin (2021) points out, an *intentional* community may have to maintain boundaries around membership to keep with their intention. In this sense, they are not unlike other insular groups of people, such as many religious communities, and may be similarly viewed as having rituals which have also been shown to support subjective well-being (Wood 2016). Xygalatas (2022) sees rituals as causally opaque behaviors that require focus and attention, for they involve an order of actions to be remembered and followed accurately, which can serve to bring groups of people together and support well-being. In anthropologist Alan Fiske's Relational Models Theory, as described in his book *Structures of Social Life: The Four Elementary Forms of Human Relations* (1991), rituals fall within elementary forms, or models, of human relation that help to explain the varied ways that individuals interact with each other and exchange resources in each social situation. Certain of these relational models include Authority Ranking, relationships ordered along a hierarchy with those of higher rank holding greater authority over those of lower rank who in turn benefit from greater guidance and protection, Equality Matching, relationships characterized by in-kind reciprocity concerned

with maintaining a balanced state of affairs, and Communal Sharing, which involves a cohesiveness in relationships where commonalities are emphasized over individual differences. In settings where people are on sociable terms, like living in community, it becomes difficult to totally ignore your neighbor. Often, the opposite is incentivized, where orders of exchange and reciprocity are made to maintain relations of support, even if one gives more than another, rather than sever them after a deal is done (Graeber 2014). While negative health outcomes can occur with group membership, the Social Identity Approach to Health, also known as the Social Cure approach, posits that on-the-whole health/well-being is enhanced by unlocking psychological resources through forming a social identity within groups, like finding meaning, connection, and trust with others (Haslam et al. 2018). Intentional communities been found to have high levels of self-reported well-being compared to other populations and replicate positive effects typically associated with religion, such as meaning in life and active participation in social gatherings (Grinde et al. 2018). When this coming together around a common thought or behavior enlivens and unifies the group, it is what Emile Durkheim (2008) describes as collective effervescence.

Studying the ritualistic behavior within the Los Angeles Ecovillage can offer insight into areas that have not been explored as much, as in ritual's relationship to well-being in intentional communities, particularly the urban intentional community context of the Los Angeles Ecovillage. Furthermore, although it is a factor, psychological well-being in this context is not limited to an individual's self-reported quality of mental and physical health. It extends to the collective, from the fundamental psychological need of social relatedness to an arguably collective expression of well-being in collective effervescence. In studying the community's component parts and behaviors, the well-being of the individuals who make up the group, as well as that of the group itself, a paradigm may be formed for how intentional community can support psychological needs.

I will examine this possible paradigm in three subsections. First, I will focus on the consensus process of community meetings and membership, then in the safeguarding of both housing and nature through land stewardship, and finally with the "Community Glue" activities that endeavor toward social cohesion within the group. However, it should be acknowledged that, in tailoring this project to the specific needs of Los Angeles, there is a limitation of scope concerning the perspectives offered by other cultures regarding issues of sociability and solitude. It should also be said that, in addressing the research objective, engaged members who identified with the community were interviewed, and so may not reflect the views of people who have become less identified with the group over time.

The methods used in this investigation relied on participant observation, interviews, and autoethnography. Participant observation occurred over a period of approximately eight months from July 2023 to February 2024, in which I observed social gatherings of community members as well as people in their daily interactions. During that same eight-month period, I interviewed seven community members, all of whom I have known for years, about their experience of living in community and their relationship to well-being in community. While I pulled from field notes and participant perspectives, I have also pulled from my nine years of living at the Los Angeles Ecovillage through an autoethnographic approach weaved into the larger ethnography. Scaling occurred from my experience and that of my interlocutors to the broader sociocultural context of Los Angeles and the United States. My history of immersion in the intentional community influenced the selection of the study site and the participants involved.

I have obtained the informed consent, as approved by the Institutional Review Board, of all persons interviewed to use the information they have given for this research study, as well as the use of real names. Informed consent was obtained both in written form and recorded in audio and/or audio/visual form. Interviewees were given time to review the informed consent form and were given the option to be recorded in audio/visual or in an audio only format. As informed consent for research and publication purposes was included, all signed forms and interview recordings used for this research can thus be accessed upon request by the journal of publication.

Reflexivity

I, the researcher of this project, officially became a resident member of the Los Angeles Ecovillage upon moving into the main building in February 2015. As a member of this community, I recognize my close relationships with my neighbors and fellow Ecovillagers, time spent in shared meals, conversations, and community service, may bias my analysis. That said, I have seen challenges abound, so I am reluctant to say the Ecovillage is perfect by any means. In all, however, I am predisposed to support this community I call home, in shared values with my neighbors, including cooperative living, ecological sustainability, and socioeconomic justice through fair housing. As such, I believe what the community has accomplished based on these guiding principles—a cooperative approach to securing affordable housing and demonstrating an ecological lifestyle in an urban setting for others to emulate if desired—is worthy of attention.

Meetings and Membership

According to the Los Angeles Times Editorial Board (2022), Los Angeles has a relatively acute concentration of power in city hall with only fifteen city councilmembers representing approximately four million people across the city. While each city councilmember in Los Angeles represents around 259,999 people, San Francisco's city councilmembers each represent around 79,000 people and Long Beach has around 52,000 per district represented. Practically speaking, a concentration like this can make it more difficult to gain access to your elected leaders, as there are so many more people in each district for each one councilmember to represent than might be typical for another city. This problem of inclusion in governance could also prove particularly difficult for people with less resources to gain access to their representatives as they compete for attention with the already wealthy, connected, and powerful of the city's elite. As the struggles of realizing democracy in Los Angeles persist, the community members of the Los Angeles Ecovillage continue to engage with their own, alternative, democratic process.

Monday night community meetings take place remotely online by video nowadays, but historically they have been held in what is known as "the community room." On the second floor of the main apartment building, the community room is a centrally located one-bedroom unit that has been converted into a communal space. The room is expansive enough to have a projector and couches for hosting people, and while at the time of this writing it has not hosted in-person community wide meetings for some time, it still regularly hosts other meetings held by members and friends of the community. As a traditional meeting space, the community room remains an emblem of the main model of decision-making that the Ecovillage follows: consensus-based decision-making.

Consensus at the Ecovillage is a decision-making process which follows its own order, defined by the need to have *unanimous agreement* within the group, with at least ten members present to constitute a quorum needed to make an official community-wide decision. As there are several members in the community, all of whom having their own unique perspectives and life experiences, a unanimous decision can at times be a difficult prospect. Xygalatas (2022) argues that ritual actions are characterized by rigidity, being performed with fidelity and in a particular order, thereby offering a sense of control that can ease anxiety in the face of adversity. The consensus-decision ritual at the Ecovillage is of a bureaucratic nature, with many formal steps, often resulting in a bureaucratic policy decision to be added to a bureaucracy of existing policies, in the pursuit of order. The feat described next is the result of years of painstaking trials and errors to organize a

community of around fifty people together in—relative—democratic unanimity and connection.

As a part of this next week's designated facilitation team, I send out a community-wide call by e-mail for agenda item requests a week ahead of the meeting. After a week's time, my co-facilitator and I publicly finalize the agenda via e-mail again. Typically, all the requests populated during that week-long window are included in the agenda. But there may be exceptions if there are any objections from members, which I, of course, always dread. If there are objections, that could mean e-mail sparring, facilitators mediating between competing concerns, and hurt feelings. Thankfully, that doesn't happen this time, and come Monday night, the meeting is held. I am the active facilitator, and my co-facilitator is note-taking tonight. It is my responsibility to make sure the meeting follows the set agenda, from introductions of all attendees to decisions and then check outs. I begin to call on people who raise their hands for the first agenda item. But since this particular item on allowing dogs to live in the building causes a lot of eagerly raised hands, I need to make a line for people waiting to speak called a "stack." I know every one of the people who feel deeply about this issue, and I am closer to some more than others. I cannot take sides, however, because I am the facilitator. I must put whatever preferences I have aside to remain impartial and "agreement prejudiced," meaning that while it is important for me to not choose sides between community members' preferences, it is also important to facilitate toward where there seems to be agreement among those preferences. If any one member has a concern about a decision, it is my responsibility as a facilitator, and ours as a community, to listen and take heed of that concern in the decision. Ideally, this leads to a resolution but if not, then a decision may not be made that night, in which case it is tabled or "bike racked" for later. Or it may even be what is called a "blocking concern," which then vetoes the decision even if it only comes from one person.

As may clear, there are a lot of balls to juggle in making communitywide decisions. When juggled successfully, the significance of reaching consensus is that of unity, reflected in a unanimous decision, and achievement, in the overcoming of obstacles. Arriving at consensus can be an ideal expression of democratic concord, with each member having their voice heard and represented in the final decision. But with any one person being able to block a decision, it is not without its acrimony. On the decision-making process, community member Dilean says, "For me it was very disconcerting that there's an obvious chink in the system. . . . this very easily affected system, you know, by one person being able to literally mess with everything." Indeed, in years past, I have seen young people yell at elderly folks, elderly folks yell at each other, and myself breakdown *crying* over certain decisions.

Most frequently controversial, if at all, tend to be decisions around community membership. This is because those decisions require deliberation on whether prospective members will be approved for membership and so indefinite housing in one of the building's units. It is a question of fit between the prospective member and the community, and one of scarcity with several people interested and limited housing availability. While the Los Angeles Ecovillage has its unique circumstances to weigh in admitting new members, intentional communities in general may have to set boundaries around membership to keep with their original intentions (Rubin 2021). To navigate difficult decisions demands patience on the part of community members, with a ground rule to meetings including boundaries around aggression. Lois, a co-founding member of the community, reflected on the history that led to changes to community decisions around membership:

Lois:

There was a lot of divisiveness and contentiousness. We didn't have a clear membership vetting process. And that was one of my, as I look back, one of the biggest lessons that we teach very seriously for future intentional community and cohousing and Ecovillage founders, that you got to have a really good vetting process.

As challenging a problem as consensus governance can be, there can also be satisfaction from the discipline of direct democracy, especially once a decision is made. Self-determination theory's case for competence as a fundamental psychological need involves feeling a sense of accomplishment through effective interaction with one's environment (Ryan and Deci 2000). Gaining mastery of one's actions through challenging experiences can be satisfying to the point of increasing motivation, helping to sustain engagement in one's activities and so support well-being in that regard, as well. A rite of passage every Ecovillager must go through to become an official member of the community, the membership process is one such challenge to be mastered. The process of prospective and current members getting to know each other, in providing opportunity for effective interaction, can be enormously rewarding. Depending on how people internalize external forces, it can also be quite disillusioning, or somewhere in between.

There are stages of the membership process that serves as formal reflections of where the person stands in their journey. First, you may begin the membership process by attending a community meeting, announcing your interest, and continuing to build rapport with current members. Then, typically after a period of three months of active participation with the

community, the next stage, called the “greenlight stage,” turns you from a casually prospective member into a now proper candidate to be considered for membership. Giving someone the “greenlight” acts as a signal for community members to take more initiative to get to know you if they have not already. Finally, after around a period of at least six months of active participation, you will have your decision made by the community on what’s called “provisional membership,” the stage at which, if approved, you can move into a unit within the building as a new member of the community. “Full membership” is the final stage, occurring after at least a year of provisional membership with the main difference being that once you are a full member you gain the right to block decisions in the consensus process.

According to relational models theory, one fundamental relational model is that of Authority Ranking (Fiske 1991). In Authority Ranking, clearly stated hierarchical structures are respected, with individuals holding different levels of power. As a part of this exchange, those of higher authority are expected to provide guidance and order in the relationship. The membership process here aligns with an Authority Ranking model in that there is a clearly delineated hierarchy, from interested visitors to fully fledged members. While having a hierarchy at all may sound antithetical to an intentional community living in cooperative housing, it serves the purpose of providing structure to the initiation process so that candidates have direction from community members in how to proceed. A hierarchy also establishes boundaries within that structure to help both sides determine whether living together will be a good fit between them. Facilitation, too, is another example of Authority Ranking, with the facilitators taking on temporary authority to help guide and structure community meetings. However, relational models theory also helps to explain interpersonal conflict as a mismatch of relational models at play between people. In the case of rituals in community meetings, for instance, as mentioned conflict has emerged when authority is not fully respected, with misalignments around one person being able to block decisions in consensus. As we will see, Authority Ranking is not the only relational model at play at the Ecovillage, and even where it is at play is within the context of apparently more prominent themes within the community.

Membership is the basis from which new people can move into the buildings at the Ecovillage. But only after eighteen months can people elect to be approved as an owner member, and being an owner member of a limited equity housing cooperative differs from owning property like a condominium. Owner members in this case own shares of the housing cooperative, which owns title to the property (Los Angeles Eco-Village 2024b). Everybody, owner or not, pays a comparable monthly living amount to the co-op, considered an “assessment” for owners, and “rent” to the co-op for

renter members. The community membership at-large can decide on changing the cost associated with housing, but this seldom happens. That too can be controversial, and, again, collective decision-making in consensus is quite an involved process.

The consensed-upon monthly minimum participation expectations of membership are engaging in two of the following: one community meeting, one community dinner, and contributing four hours of volunteer time (Los Angeles Eco-Village Wiki 2008). However, outside of blocking a decision, there are not many official enforcement mechanisms at the Ecovillage. People may be encouraged to exit if noncooperative, but punitive recourses, like surveillance or eviction, are widely considered anathema to community values. What that means is that while there are often boundaries on whether new decisions go through, as in whether to approve a member, the community has not typically reached a consensus way to enforce behavior once a decision has been made. Although rare, I have seen members get approved, move in, and then not see them at all for months. With people at different points in their lives, once active members have become inactive and vice versa over the years, too; so it is technically possible to live at the Ecovillage without participating in the project. For the same reasons, it is also possible that someone could choose not to follow other policies as agreed upon by the community. But abstention or denial is perhaps not without the natural consequences of members being less than satisfied with that circumstance. There can be an awkward, inadvertent, social disincentive from nonparticipation in some ways, when you are living with people harboring unmet expectations of you over an extended period.

Discussion has thus emerged about whether policy-agreements are requirements or guidelines. The expectations of membership are largely held in an act of good faith that the person will follow through on their stated commitment to the community upon becoming a member. The community de facto operates on an honor system, then, where trust and connection hinge on staying true to community agreements voluntarily. This approach does leave the community vulnerable to being taken advantage of, which has led to grievances. But individuals are also more likely to genuinely want to participate when they do so voluntarily, allowing people the freedom to experiment with what works best for them personally.

From there, as Lois explains, “. . . some people are paid for doing certain things and some people are volunteers for doing certain things.” The combination of voluntary and paid work in the community tends to break down along lines of how relaxed an activity can be realistically. Voluntary work entails more leisurely activities like gardening and making food for sharing. It can also involve some administrative work found in committees, smaller

groups of members coming together for a specific purpose, which can cover a range of responsibilities, from emergency preparedness to specially approved members voluntarily offering their input on management decisions. Voluntary committees can also be conceived of more broadly, as really anything people want to initiate as a committee project in service of the community. Paid work is typically reserved for tasks which require more expertise, higher stakes, and/or a greater time commitment. These include contracting out for building repairs and employing the resident manager's salary to address various building-related issues.

Membership within the community provides a distinctly cooperative venue to socially identify with a group, offering an alternative to mainstream norms. Consensus decision-making can serve as a lifeline of inclusion, particularly for people who may not readily adhere to more concentrated forms of representation in society. Moreover, in the Social Cure approach, membership within a social group overall has been found to promote health and well-being, but only to the extent there is identification with that social group (Haslam et al. 2018). Group membership within a community like the Ecovillage can help address the problem of human disconnection by unlocking psychological resources, such as social support and a sense of meaning and purpose, especially for individuals who find it challenging to connect with groups they identify with outside the mainstream. This could promote a higher level of health and well-being that some may not otherwise have access to in society. In that same vein of support, from co-housing to consensus, cooperative living can be described as a form of caregiving, or stewardship, as well.

Land Stewardship

The Union of Concerned Scientists (2018) reported on rising sea levels from climate change are projected to raise the cost of property by billions in the future. This was known years before another report by The U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2022) found that, on a given night, roughly 582,500 people are experiencing homelessness in the United States, 30% or 171,521 of whom were living in the state of California. As of February 2022, it was estimated that 40% of all the people experiencing homeless in California were living in Los Angeles (Davalos and Kimberlin 2023). In the *California Study of People Experiencing Homelessness*, conducted by the University of California San Francisco Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative (2023), researchers found among the top reasons for homelessness in California were the cost of housing and a loss or reduction of income, a disproportionate amount, nearly half, of all unhoused adults being age fifty

years or older. With several elderly people at the Ecovillage living on a fixed income, and in a city that, according to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (2023), has just seen a 10% rise from the previous year in the amount of people experiencing homelessness, the community has found an alternative approach to socially address the problem of living in an area with such a high cost of living.

Land stewardship at the Los Angeles Ecovillage involves caring for the land upon which the community stands. Stewardship includes tending to the land itself in activities like gardening and rainwater catchment, but also non-profit administration to protect the land and the people living on it from exploitation. Administration here ritualistically entails Ecovillagers as Urban Soil/Tierra Urbana members attending meetings, making agreements, and, in partnership with the Beverly-Vermont Community Land Trust, the implementation of a ground lease (Beverly-Vermont Community Land Trust 2023). A community land trust is a nonprofit entity that follows a model where the land trust retains the legal ownership to the land under a home, which then ensures that the property will remain at an affordable selling price if it is ever sold on the housing market again. By taking land out of the speculative market, it is protected from speculative land appreciation and ergo from the profit motive to raise the cost of housing, as well. In doing so, the Beverly-Vermont Community Land Trust can provide affordable housing options to lower income residents in the neighborhood, promote home ownership by residents, and create an equitable alternative to profiting off one's assets in the housing market.

Lara:

We were interested in having the land owned separately from the buildings to make sure there wasn't the pitfall of the co-op realizing the sale of their asset could be more beneficial to them individually than maintaining it as a community resource. . . . So it's both a safeguard and ensures a further scope to provide affordable housing.

Among the people I interviewed, affordable housing was a universally agreed upon benefit of living in community. When you pay *below* market rate in a city with one of the worst housing crises in the country, it is not difficult for community members to find consensus here.

Hartley:

People here pay about a third of what market value [rent] in this same area for the same square footage would pay. . . . Between the supportive community

and the low rent, I was able to leave a toxic job and be unemployed for a few months until I got a job that's way better for my life.

The fundamental relational model of Equality Matching (Fiske 1991) applies to how community members here have collectively agreed upon the value of affordable housing to pay in rent. In relational models theory, Equality Matching occurs when there is equal reciprocity in relationships that serve to keep the relationship in a balanced state. By deciding that everyone in the building is to pay a specific amount below market rate, there is a mutual trust among community members in their support of each other to pay enough to cover needed community expenses. And in turn, there is also fairness in the amount paid to keep a balance of housing affordability for all in place. Land stewardship as a shared ritualistic behavior, then, is characterized by an equal exchange that, in reciprocity, ensures viable affordable housing for everyone involved.

This sort of exchange stands in contrast to a profit-oriented approach where a landlord might extract as much as possible in rent from their tenants. What's more is that, while, on one level, Equality Matching exists between community members who equally benefit from below-market rate rent by their mutual arrangement, the *process* of achieving such an equivalent exchange transforms it beyond a merely one-to-one transaction. Between maintaining the Ecovillage's own nonprofit and that of the community land trust, in communal fashion people ritualistically had to attend meetings, get to know their neighbors, and determine needs and capacities. Ritual becomes a basis from which community can emerge as relationships are cultivated, a communal dynamic wherein a totally different set of principles begins to apply. These principles act as a sort of morality less concerned with exact equivalence and more with a "constant process of interaction tending toward equivalence" begins to apply (Graeber 2014, 103). In other words, in having met you, lived with you and through some pretty difficult decisions we've had to make together, in tending *toward* equivalence, first off at the very least I am less likely to feel comfortable extracting a profit from you, especially once we've achieved a shared trust financially. But I am also less inclined to keep track of accounts because our shared trust becomes an emotional one that understands relationships to be about more than receipts. Urban Soil/Tierra Urbana keeps by-the-book records, but this is to say that in securing such mutual financial trust a cultural shift in emphasis can happen: as I am more likely to have your interests in mind and trust you to have mine in yours, whether you do more for me or I for you becomes beside the point so long as we continuously stay concerned for the basic well-being of the other. A collective well-being is arguably safeguarded then to the degree that we in

community keep from further capitalist capture, in the housing market and in our own human relations.

An example of how stewarding the land at the Ecovillage goes beyond the commodification of human relations lies in that which a community land trust entrusts people to care for: the land itself. When I was in the process to become a member at the Ecovillage, one of the first activities that I engaged in was volunteering at the Learning Garden, with Lara as the primary steward. While pulling palm weeds, I would have conversations with Lara and several other community members who visited the space.

Lara:

Well, the space across the street from the building where I'm living, is owned by the LA Unified School District. The Beverly Vermont Community Land Trust advocated for creating a Learning Garden on the vacant lot. . . . [Now] There's an ongoing responsibility that the Land Trust has to provide this space to school children in various schools surrounding the Learning Garden.

Gardening at the Ecovillage is a ritual of land stewardship that ranges from soil cultivation to intentional water use and plant selection. Ecovillagers often choose native plants naturally occurring in the region for their gardens, as they typically require less maintenance and are more sustainable in the area's environment. Plants, whether they were intentionally seeded or volunteered from the wild, are watered as needed, usually from recycled graywater systems that come from sinks and washing machines. Most gardening takes place in the courtyard, which sits in between the arms of the apartment building as a large square of land. Near the center there is a tall tree, under which Ecovillagers have staked out plots to steward for their own personal gardens. Plots are decided upon request by community members to the gardening committee, which gives communal approval for personal use. Like with the differing needs of plants themselves, there is a dynamically ordered arrangement, as gardening practices vary among community members, with some people staying more active or desiring more space than others. This can lead to the land being contested for plot usage. Conflicts have indeed emerged over garden use, but personal gardens more regularly serve the function of communing with nature in the growing and caring of plants.

Self-determination theory argues for another fundamental psychological need in autonomy, which Ryan and Deci (2000) define as experiencing oneself as self-determined in their behavior. This means acting in alignment with one's personal motivations and values, as opposed to feeling obligated or controlled by external forces. Having the need for autonomy met helps support

well-being in promoting intrinsic motivation and, as will be discussed later with self-determination met in relatedness, a greater sense of social development. Here, members of the Ecovillage enjoy a sense of autonomy by not having to pay rent to a landlord at a market rate so high it has become associated with beforementioned widespread homelessness. Community members are freed from having to work longer hours to compensate for a higher cost of living and, in accord with their own motivations rather than others', can pursue the parts of life that interest them, like gardening.

Gardening is a ritual at the Ecovillage that lends itself to practice with neighbors in community, as well. The area is filled with evidence of group involvement: together community members have built rainwater catchment and graywater systems, placed trellises to hold vines and other plant life, a chicken coop to house chickens which provide pest and weed control along with the eggs they lay, and a hot composting bin to decompose organic matter as a part of soil enrichment. In the social sphere, Hennemann posits rituals as promoters of autonomy, using Berne's understanding of autonomy as the capacity for awareness, intimacy, and spontaneity (Hennemann 2018). Since rituals position people to make active decisions that can involve the expression of feelings and the establishing of connections with others, Hennemann sees rituals as promoters of autonomy in the sense that they encourage conscious participation amidst dynamic social interplay. This pairs well with a component of self-determination theory that claims competence, a sense of accomplishment, will not enhance motivation unless coupled with autonomy (Ryan and Deci 2000), in that conscious participation as promoted by rituals can in turn lend itself to accomplishing tasks consciously aligned with one's own motivations. Being freed up to do something you really want to do, like plant a seed, tend to it, and eventually see that bear fruit can be enormously fulfilling on its own, and very special when shared.

“Community Glue”

Created in Los Angeles, a frequently referenced standard measure for human loneliness, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Loneliness Scale, was used in 2018 by the health insurer Cigna in partnership with research firm Ipsos to gauge loneliness in the general population of the United States (Cigna 2018). It was found that almost half of those surveyed reported feeling sometimes or always alone and/or left out. The stakes are laid bare in the social epidemiological research showing a link between loneliness and negative health outcomes both mentally and physically (Gerst-Emerson and Jayawardhana 2015). Loneliness in Los Angeles has become so prominent an issue that in 2021 the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted

unanimously to research the effects of loneliness and isolation on residents, as well as how the county can address the challenge (Valdez 2021). Living intentionally in community offers one such way to address the problem of loneliness and its negative health effects. Coincidentally, within the same city of Los Angeles, there is also a group of people who have lived, worked, and played together in community for decades.

From movie nights, fundraisers, the potluck, and more—there are a lot of opportunities to socialize with your neighbors at the Los Angeles Ecovillage. The social cohesion in the community is epitomized by the initiative of one member, Dilean, who started a committee called “Community Glue” to find points of social commonality.

Dilean:

“Community Glue” is to create activities to bring the community together. The whole point was to create a sense of togetherness. Even if it’s just like sending an e-mail out saying like, “Hey, let’s update one another on each other’s lives” kind of thing. Just to keep us together, *reasons* to bring each other together.

There is an *active initiating*, then, at times needed to build the social bonds of community, and a reason for coming together can provide motivation for what can turn into a moment of collective life. The social initiative can be a spontaneous spurring of social activity, as has oft been the case of Dilean’s efforts to bring people together via e-mail and with sudden challenges asking people to eat vegan or go sober for a week. Social initiative is also reflected in more routine practices, like what happens every Saturday at the Ecovillage at nine o’clock in the morning, when community members come together clad in reflective safety vests, carrying trash bags and grabber tools to participate in a community street clean-up. Irma is a community member who helped spearhead the street clean-up actions from the beginning:

Irma:

There’s always been 4 to 8 people who show up all the time. And it’s just so nice. We just go, we just pick up trash, we walk, we chit chat, “How’s your week? What’s going on?” Real easy. And then we’re always like, “Damn, this place looks good.”. . . You can feel there is always some joy that happens in that time. And we’re always happy—picking up trash—which is funny.

The ritual here appears straightforward—if you see trash, pick it up and put it in the bag—but there is something more that happens from there that makes this causally opaque. At the street clean-up one day, I noticed myself

saying “hello” again, but to total strangers walking by, and as I picked up plastic with my grabber, I felt my neighborhood grow a little bigger. I saw a fellow Ecovillager stop and have a conversation with someone who I didn’t recognize, and later came to find they had never met before. But who is unfamiliar suddenly becomes recognizable when you take the initiative to do something recognizable, like picking up trash in a bright safety vest. And like magic, people in the neighborhood are no longer just strangers on the street who avoid each other, but people who can all relate in a familiarity with the idea of picking up trash on the street. If you want to get involved in the community, the street clean-up is a way in—keeping streets free of litter can make them full of neighbors.

Another social function occurs every Sunday evening at the Ecovillage, when community members gather to eat dinner together. There is a certain order and expectation to this convening, as it is a *potluck*, wherein each person brings their own dish as an offering to share with the community. Integral to this ritual, sharing is a way that I can come with my standard bottle of wine and Lara, a much better cook than I, can drink that wine along with the cauliflower casserole she made for all of us to enjoy. In other words, I am relieved. I do not have to cook everything, and I can bring to the table what I can manage. While the expectation is to share something, aside from the food being plant-based there are no expectations for people to bring something specified beforehand. At the potlucks, then, renowned chefs like Bruce and Lara could bring full meals as others bring wine or tea, or it could be that everyone, including even me sometimes, cooked something, and there is more food than anyone can eat that night. If you only bring tea, though, you might get a very public e-mail from Bruce putting you on blast about it.

In having a set time, the potluck is the place where community members can psychologically, and culinarily, prepare for social interaction, more assured to have quality time together as opposed to chance encounters during the week. As we come together in sharing food, I witness people from different ethnic backgrounds laughing with each other, octogenarians teasing kids, and myself waking up to what it’s like to be around people again after being holed up in my room for what feels like weeks. At the potluck I see people who have been gone for months or even years welcomed back into the fold, and new people welcomed in for the first time. The potluck is among the most known open channels by which people can engage with the community, often the main entry point for people coming from the outside and the most regular stop for people coming from within. In that, it is also at the crossroads of other activities from which people meet.

Anthropologist David Graeber defines ““baseline communism”” as the foundation of human social life, existing wherever any degree of ““from each

according to their abilities, to each according to their needs”” applies in social relations (Graeber 2014, 98). This “baseline communism” is that beforementioned different set of principles, that moral logic acting as the basis for sharing and that which makes it difficult to totally ignore people when on friendly terms with them. Reciprocity is redefined here to mean not necessarily that someone will do the same for you as you do for them, but the sense that they *would* do that for you (Graeber 2014). At the Ecovillage, through social processes like the potluck, ritual is the behavioral conduit that this reciprocity is made conscious. You may be too tired to cook tonight, but I may bring food for you as you have brought for me in the past and multiply that by several different relationships of exchange intertwined over time. Ritual allows for the elevation of “baseline communism” beyond the habit of holding the door open for someone and into an applied intention toward the well-being of the collective.

Bicycles are a kind of “community glue” in their rallying an ecofriendly alternative to cars that use fossil fuels. As a long-time community member, Bruce, says, “I’d always liked to bike as a hobby, but this turned it into a political statement. So, the Eco-Village really made being without a car a political statement.” Several people at the Ecovillage are avid cyclers who prefer to bike instead of drive, whether it’s to commute to work, take their kids to school, or just for fun. People often gather at the Ecovillage to go on group bike rides, particularly for an event that takes place six times a year called “CicLAvia,” which is hosted by a nonprofit that helps temporarily close streets off to cars for bicyclers to ride freely along varying routes in the city (CicLAvia 2023). The ritual is pedaling bikes together en masse, which comes to offer a vision of a less car-centric city to live in. It is in the movement of these rides, embodied by the bicycle, that a larger, social movement makes a political symbol of planet and people.

Communal Sharing in relational models theory (Fiske 1991) is an elementary form of human relations that involves a communal pool of shared resources, where people view themselves with a shared identity. Commonality is more the focus in Communal Sharing than perceived differences, and people are seen as equivalent with one another. The rituals of sharing food, riding bikes, and cleaning together involve their own mixes of shared resources, inclusivity of social identities, and mutual support. Social bonds are reinforced when a group is collectively aligned in Communal Sharing. The collective well-being of the group seems to also be supported, then, in that people become increasingly secure from behaviors that are more concerned with the common good.

In looking at the social conditions that can promote well-being, Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that relatedness is a fundamental psychological need to

feel connected and belonging with others. When conditions are more conducive to meeting the need for relatedness, as in positive social interactions, meaningful relationships are likelier to be found. These relationships can then support one's motivations which are more self-determined and personally endorsed, even if those motivations are introduced from others originally. Basically, positive social interactions make it easier to welcome others' perspectives, and from there you may be more inclined to agree with those perspectives as your own, as well, which then helps support a sense of overall well-being in your need for relatedness being met.

In my own experience living at the Los Angeles Ecovillage, this relatedness came about for me in our community's effort to create the Los Angeles Ecovillage Family Childcare Cooperative. Over a roughly two-year period from 2016 to 2017, a few of my fellow Ecovillagers and I worked cooperatively to maintain childcare services with the support of parents at the Ecovillage and throughout the city. The basis of this operation revolved around a sequence of rituals: Parents at varying points in the day would drop off their kids at the childcare and sign them in, the kids would play and be read to by childcare providers, followed by lunch, diaper changes, and nap time. At the time, community meetings took place in person, so having childcare providers who lived at the Ecovillage also gave parents the opportunity to attend the meetings at night with their children under community care.

During this era, working at the childcare helped me financially support myself while also allowing me to give back to the community. I was able to provide a service to my neighbors in a recognizable way, which garnered me a reputation and led to other work babysitting for families outside of the childcare cooperative. In working at the childcare and beyond, I regularly met with parents, their children, and my co-workers. In the recurring rituals of diaper changing and somehow transitioning to nap time, I felt like the banks of a river holding space for a flow of emotions, of others and my own. By the end of my time at the childcare, I had become seasoned through a practice. Because of the opportunity afforded to me by my community, I felt a newfound confidence in my ability to listen to people's needs. It did not matter if those needs were expressed in a flood of screaming tears—I was there for it.

Of the social environment fostered by the community, Bruce says:

Bruce:

In an urban area it's filled with anonymity. And the Ecovillage is not anonymous. You can be here, but you can't be anonymous here. Even people who are here short-term notice there is an affinity Ecovillagers have for each other. We

always say, "Hello." It's a neighborly place. It's not considered good form to just not say, "Hello."

The Los Angeles Ecovillage is unique as an intentional community in some ways by being in a highly urban area. The urban life of the community translates to many people coming in and out of the Ecovillage, which perhaps is not surprising, but as such it can also stand in contrast with the current epidemic of loneliness that exists in cities like Los Angeles and throughout the United States. Another pattern among interviewees at the Ecovillage was that, when speaking on "well-being," however that was defined by them, that concept was never referred to in a vacuum, but always in relation to people or activities. The busyness of the city in combination with an intentional community where everyone knows each other makes for a social network with abundant activity. Berkman and Krishna (2014) argue that health is in part determined through social engagement, which they see as a pathway to health involving social networks, person-to-person connections that offer meaningful social roles to people. Included in these roles are opportunities for companionship and sociability with other people, which can lend meaning to participation in and reinforced by a social context.

James:

Now that I'm living here, I get to really meet everyone that lives here more. . . . I make a lot more connections. For example, I might build a cargo bike with one of the residents here who's going to teach me. You know, one of the neighbors might get me a job doing some Korean interpretation, right? So things like that happen. I feel like a lot more opportunities come about.

At the Ecovillage, rituals act as the building blocks from which the community's social network can offer opportunities for engaged social connections, along with the sustainment of those engagements when rituals are held regularly in a designated manner. Rituals, as demarcated categories, can imbue our lives with meaning by turning what was once mundane into something special (Xygalatas 2022). The potluck for instance is a happening that for many symbolizes communion, the sharing of life, through food with one's neighbors in community, and the specialness of that communion for people can also have a special effect. Berkman and Krishna (2014) claim that meaning made from social engagement can connect positive affect and self-esteem toward greater mental health. In doing so, this pathway has the capacity to add a sense of value, belonging, and attachment apart from the level of support received or perceived, reflecting how the existence of a social network itself provides the conditions for social cohesion. Particularly as it pertains to

older adults, engaging in community affairs has been linked with improved rates of subjective well-being (Chen and Zhang 2022). The very fact that there is a network of social engagement at the Ecovillage may do well to protect people within it from the most negative health effects of social isolation and loneliness.

Although the Ecovillage is a place where everybody knows your name, it is not necessarily the case that you will be everyone's best friend. As mentioned, conflict has emerged. This has sometimes led to estrangement. In other cases, people are not estranged but have politely chosen not to associate with each other on a regular basis, often out of certain differences in personality or interests. Cliques can emerge, too, and there are several members who prefer to spend more time in solitude than socially with others. That said, conflict can also provide opportunities for growth, and perhaps the clearest pattern to emerge among those I interviewed was that of preferring to know your neighbors, even if there was not always affinity for those neighbors.

Emile Durkheim viewed the whole as defined by its parts and not vice versa, with collective rituals as the basis for a quality that emerges synchronously within the group, an excitement in unison, a collective effervescence that serves to blur the distinction between the individual and the whole (Xygalatas 2022). The social bonds here give rise to and protect a sense of well-being, not only to individuals but to those individuals by virtue of the social network they find themselves in. Those social bonds, that quality of effervescence, are influenced by a shared identity with what is done in the group. While in-group identification can support health and well-being, the willful identification here with a group that values prosocial norms of behavior reveals how social identity can inform social interactions (Haslam et al. 2018). Meeting your neighbors while picking up trash with a group of friends. Catching up with old friends over dinner while other friends are playing with their kids. Riding bikes together en masse along a street blocked off from cars. These rituals of the Los Angeles Ecovillage are components of a larger whole, with each community member playing a role in that whole, culminating into a series of collectively effervescent events that continue connections toward a network of "well-beings," a collective well-being.

Conclusion

The Los Angeles Ecovillage consists of people who dedicate themselves to community activities, here described as rituals with their particular orders and meanings held by the community. Elementary forms of human relations are at play in the ritualistic behavior of the community that help ensure structure, fairness, and the sharing of resources in mutual support of people within

the group. These rituals construct a foundation upon which psychological needs can be met, whether it's through overcoming the obstacles of group decision-making, stewarding affordable housing, or socializing with your neighbors. When these parts are taken as a whole, they are embodied by a social network and pathway to greater health and well-being. Within this whole are the individuals who make up the group, each with their own role to play and each a part of something transcendent in favor of their community.

The social alternative approaches described here can address health and well-being related problems presented by societal barriers to human connection. Such societal barriers have included concentrations of power in governance, difficulty identifying with mainstream culture, high costs of living, and an epidemic of loneliness. Living intentionally in community can help to circumvent these barriers, to meet fundamental psychological needs in one's own autonomy, relatedness, and sense of accomplishment, as well as offer a path for many whose health and well-being may benefit from tapping into psychological resources like social support, identification with a social group, and an increased sense of purpose from the work done therein.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Dani X. Knoll  <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8038-5954>

References

- Berkman, Lisa F. and Aditi Krishna. 2014. "Social Network Epidemiology." In *Social Epidemiology*, edited by Lisa Berkman, Ichiro Kawachi, & M. Maria Glymour. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beverly-Vermont Community Land Trust. 2023. "Beverly-Vermont Community Land Trust." <https://www.bvclt.org/>
- Chen, Lanshuang, and Zhen Zhang. 2022. "Community Participation and Subjective Well-Being of Older Adults: The Roles of Sense of Community and Neuroticism." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19 (6): 3261. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19063261>
- Ciclavia. 2023. "CicLAvia." <https://www.ciclavia.org/>

- Cigna. 2018. "Cigna U.S. Loneliness Index." https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/docs/IndexReport_1524069371598-173525450.pdf
- Davalos, Monica, and Sara Kimberlin. 2023. "Who Is Experiencing Homelessness in California?" *California Budget and Policy Center*. <https://calbudgetcenter.org/resources/who-is-experiencing-homelessness-in-california/>
- Durkheim, Emile. 2008. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fiske, Alan. 1991. *Structures of Social Life: The Four Elementary Forms of Human Relations*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Gerst-Emerson, Kerstin, and Jayani Jayawardhana. 2015. "Loneliness as a Public Health Issue: The Impact of Loneliness on Health Care Utilization among Older Adults." *American Journal of Public Health* 105 (5): 1013–19. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2014.302427>
- Graeber, David. 2014. *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House.
- Grinde, B., Ragnhild Bang Nes, Ian F. MacDonald, and David Sloan Wilson. 2018. "Quality of Life in Intentional Communities." *Social Indicators Research* 137: 625–40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-017-1615-3>
- Haslam, C., Jolanda Jetten, Tegan Cruwys, Genevieve Dingle, and S. Alexander Haslam. 2018. *The New Psychology of Health: Unlocking the Social Cure*. London: Routledge.
- Hennemann, Joana. 2018. "Rituals as Promoters of Autonomy." *International Journal of Transactional Analysis Research & Practice* 9 (2): 87–92. <https://doi.org/10.29044/v9i2p87>
- Kunze, Iris, and Flor Avelino. 2017. "Research Literature on ecovillages." https://ecovillage.org/wp-content/uploads/drupal_files/files/Literature-on-ecovillages_2017_03_13_IK_FA.pdf
- Rubin, Zach. 2021. "'We Do This at Dancing Rabbit': Recruitment and Collective Identity Processes in the Ecovillage." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 50 (4): 443–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241621994651>
- Ryan, Richard M., and Edward L. Deci. 2000. "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being." *American Psychologist* 55 (1): 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>
- Lallement, Michael. 2022. "Towards a Weberian Sociology of Intentional Communities." *Current Sociology* 70 (3): 403–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/011392120975444>
- Los Angeles Eco-Village. 2024a. "About." <https://laecovillage.org/home/about-2/>
- Los Angeles Eco-Village. 2024b. "Urban Soil/Tierra Urbana." <https://laecovillage.org/urban-soil-tierra-urbana/>
- Los Angeles Eco-Village Wiki. 2008. "Draft Participation Matrix Dec 2008." https://urbansoil.net/static/Draft_Participation_Matrix_Dec_2008.pdf
- Los Angeles Times Editorial Board. 2022. "Why L.A. Needs a Larger City Council." *Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 2022. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-11-13/fixing-city-hall-expand-council>

- Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. 2023. "LAHSA Releases Results of 2023 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count." <https://www.lahsa.org/news?article=927-lahsa-releases-results-of-2023-greater-los-angeles-homeless-count>
- University of California San Francisco Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative. 2023. "The California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness toward a New Understanding." https://homelessness.ucsf.edu/sites/default/files/2023-06/CASPEH_Report_62023.pdf
- The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2022. "The 2022 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress DECEMBER 2022." <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2022-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>
- Union of Concerned Scientists. 2018. "Underwater: Rising Seas, Chronic Floods, and the Implications for US Coastal Real Estate." <https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/attach/2018/06/underwater-analysis-full-report.pdf>
- Valdez, Jonah. 2021. "L.A. County Supervisors Take on an Unusual Issue: Loneliness." *Los Angeles Times*. December 23, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-12-23/l-a-county-supervisors-take-on-an-unusual-issue-loneliness>
- Wagner, Felix. 2012. "Ecovillage Research Review." In *Realizing Utopia: Ecovillage Endeavors and Academic Approaches*, edited by Marcus Andreas and Felix Wagner, 81–94. Munich: Rachel Carson Center.
- Wood, C. 2016. "Ritual Well-Being: Toward a Social Signaling Model of Religion and Mental Health." *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 7 (3): 223–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2016.1156556>
- Xygalatas, Dmitris. 2022. *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown Spark.

Author Biography

Dani X. Knoll is a researcher and psychotherapist living in Los Angeles, CA. Their work maintains an interdisciplinary focus, primarily bridging the fields of psychology and anthropology.