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# Measuring Success in Intentional Communities: A Critical Evaluation of Commitment and Longevity Theories

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## ABSTRACT

Intentional Communities (ICs) are groups of people that form for a specific agreed-upon purpose and live in close proximity to achieve their desired end. The prevailing scholarship in the study of these communities is that communal processes of commitment, as well as ethnic and linguistic homogeneity, play a strong role in determining a community's success when defined as how long-lived a community was. However, most of these conclusions are based in historical research on communities that no longer exist. In this article, we use survey data collected from present-day ICs to find that those assumptions do not necessarily hold true, and we propose a definition of success that incorporates how well communities report satisfaction fulfilling their intentions. By testing a sample of living ICs, we find that the community decision-making structure is more important than any other factor in determining whether communities reports progress toward this metric of success.

## Introduction

In her classic 1972 study of Intentional Communities (ICs), Rosabeth Moss Kanter found that those ICs with stronger commitment mechanisms were more likely to last longer. Practices that required members to integrate more fully with the group, such as income sharing, worship in a common religious tradition, and abstention from behaviors like sex or alcohol, were strongly predictive of how long a community would last. Thus, the most *successful* communities, in her estimation, were the ones that required the most commitment from their members.

But success is subjective, and relative to the positive definitions one attaches to a given outcome or measure. Kanter was inspired to see what worked for the most successful ICs of the mid-nineteenth century as a means of predicting the ultimate success of the newly-formed communes of the 1960s and 1970s. Her metric of success, though, was whether a community lasted for 25 years or more (a common sociological definition of a generation). This has subsequently been the target of much criticism by scholars of ICs (see, e.g., Andelson 2002; Hall 1988, Mariampolski 1979; Nepstad 2004; Sosis and Bressler 2003), as they note that it failed to take into account the reasons why people would join ICs—or whether the community made progress in fulfilling what they *intended* to do. We are similarly concerned with success, and with data collected from living communities we surveyed to make a better case for what defines it here.

In this study, we reexamine Kanter's proposition for defining success with data on present-day communities. Since many of these communities are newly formed, they cannot be subjected to

the same 25-year test for success and therefore must be measured differently. We instead propose that internal community processes that further the mission of the community should be a vital part of any success measure, since they ultimately determine success relative to the community's shared mission. Communities that successfully navigate the creation of alternative social arrangements as intended should be seen as more successful than those that struggle with norms, boundary setting, and group cohesion in enacting a shared vision. We argue that member satisfaction with community processes and characteristics offers a more direct and conceptually rigorous measure of success that does not ignore the purpose and internal workings of the community.

### ***Rationale for this study***

ICs are living arrangements as countercultural claims to a prevailing moral vision, and as a minority idea in society they are always present to some degree but subject to times of heightened importance. These include, but are not limited to, communes, co-housing arrangements, kibbutzim, and ecovillages (Miller 2010). Pitzer (1989) has theorized that "communal living is a generic social mechanism available to peoples, governments, and movements, past, present, and future" (p. 1). Were an IC (or group of ICs) to be fully successful in their vision, it would be to replace a prevailing mainstream with their own vision, thus negating their position in presenting a countercultural claim. But, instead of such a grand victory, we can examine other indicators of how ICs make good on achieving their moralistic claims.

For example, on one hand, if a community's moral claim is an environmentalist one, as it is with the ecovillage type of IC, "progress" could be measured in whether the community's practices lead to a reduction in their environmental impact. Such is the case for Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage, where the community has managed to reduce their electricity use, water consumption, and trash production to 10% of that of the average person in the United States (Lockyer 2017, Jones 2014). Beyond that, communities often seek to have an impact outside their own experimental arrangement, as with the urban Ecovillage at Ithaca profiled by Ergas (2010), where the ecovillagers' hope was to project an image of model sustainable behavior that would be adopted by others. To these communities, success may look like an agreement by the group to forego the use of certain fossil fuels or a functional collaboration in resource use that reduces overall consumption.

On the other hand, measuring a community for something it is not designed to do can be problematic. While ecovillages tend to form as intersectional critiques of mainstream U.S. culture, their intentionality is still highly focused. As Chitewere (2010) noted, "[i]n the context of ecovillages, it is relatively easy to explain why environmental justice<sup>1</sup> is not addressed in the sustainable community: Ecovillages are not designed to address racial and social inequities" (p. 327; see also Chitewere and Taylor 2010). Members of ecovillages tend to partake in community building out of a combination of personal, interpersonal, and situational challenges that weigh how they formulate and carry out their mission (Kirby 2003), as is the case with most ICs.

Success can be defined in different ways, varying from IC to IC. However, they have in common the *fulfillment of that community's moral claim* as a measure that can be operationalized as a dependent variable. The question of what makes for success in living ICs, then, is not whether people are committed through rituals (public or private) that indicate their commitment but whether they find the processes that support the community's mission—the core decision-making structures through which members contribute to the community—to be successful in accomplishing what they set out to achieve.

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<sup>1</sup>In this context, Chitewere uses "environmental justice" to mean a marker for equality in access to environmental "goods" such as access to nature and the presence of pollution, and how such things tend to be disproportionately burdensome to both the poor and people of color.

## Review of literature

### *Why do people join ICs?*

ICs can be defined as “a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed-upon purpose” (Sargent 1994:15). This typically leads to resource sharing and collective governance in some form, and it is often coupled with either a utopian vision of human arrangement or a dystopian view of the present they seek to escape. They vary in arrangements of these criteria, from communes that seek to find the optimal arrangement of human relationships based on spiritual or psychological criteria (Kinkade 1973; Melville 1972; Roberts 1971) to the newer “ecovillages” whose members seek to reduce their environmental impact (Chitewere 2010; Ergas 2010; Kirby 2003; Kasper 2008), among the many other reasons people join such communities.

They also run the gamut from retreatist to activist, and religious to secular. Nonetheless, a commonality among ICs is that they present alternative moral claims about the arrangement of society. Hall (1988) noted that the basis for ICs seems to be when “[p]eople—drawn together on the basis of a shared myth—construct a new basis for going through life together. They reduce the array of problematic issues by forging a new ethic of association, and by creating a calculus of relevance for resolving subsequent problems” (p. 38). These are moralistic claims, often tied to social critiques of the present or born from contemporary social movements (Schehr 1997). Several studies have also suggested a strong association between the rise of social movements and a concordant rise in the prevalence of ICs throughout U.S. history (Kanter 1972; Smith 2002). ICs have been hypothesized to rise and fall in popularity like “waves” reflexively to political (Carden 1976) or economic (Barkun 1984; Berry 1992) contexts much in the way that social movements do (McAdam 2010; Tarrow 1994).

The reasons why people join ICs are therefore quite varied: religious, political, economic, and more. Religious groups in the 1840s and 1850s lined up with the Progressive movement and Second Great Awakening to form what was perhaps the largest wave of ICs in the country’s history, most of which were religious but with several notable examples of secular socialist experiments based on the ideas of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier (Beecher and Bienvenu 1971; Morton 1969). Communitarian youth of the 1960s and 1970s led the way in “dropping out” of a society in which they felt strongly disaffected (Kinkade 1973; Roberts 1971), turning in some cases to psychedelic experiences to alleviate their anomie and achieve personal or spiritual fulfillment (Zicklin 1983). The mix of ICs that dot the landscape presently are more “eclectic” in their concerns, capturing a variety of communal interests (Smith 2002).

ICs, then, are a means by which people seek personal fulfillment in times and places when dominant forms of social organization denies them such things. Indeed, people living in ICs are among the happiest demographic on earth, according to Grinde et al. (2017), who deployed the common “satisfaction with life scale” (Diener et al. 1985) to members of present-day ICs in a comparative study. Such findings suggest that the abandonment of conventional norms and goals in favor of commitment to a community’s ideals and mission does not mean that members sacrifice their own well-being in the process (Grinde et al. 2017). In fact, many communitarians report that their collective lifestyle gives them a sense of purpose and pride in addressing pressing social issues and personal development (e.g., see Ludwig 2017).

### *The importance of commitment*

These communities face the problem of member commitment—getting community members to actively participate in order for the community to work. Kanter (1972) described commitment as when what a person wants to do is matched with what they must do, thus aligning the priorities

of the group to that of the individual. She posited that for communities to succeed, they must overcome three problems of commitment: continued member participation, social cohesion, and social control over members' conduct (Kanter 1968).

Kanter's thesis of commitment and community has had to withstand much criticism in the intervening time since its publication. For example, Andelson (2002) presented four major shortcomings to it: She does not examine the intentionality of those using mechanisms of commitment (thus key to defining them as *intentional* communities), the number of commitment mechanisms doesn't necessarily reflect the strength of each (and therefore we can't know whether one, some, or all are most important to generating commitment), her model doesn't incorporate whether those mechanisms changed over the life of the IC (e.g., those that practiced celibacy *at some point* were coded as just practicing it), and she tested whether the communities that lasted more than 25 years had more commitment mechanisms but didn't do a direct correlation test between those mechanisms and total longevity.

Hall (1988) reexamined Kanter's data to find a more complicated story within the story of commitment: There are actually *two* "pathways to commitment." The first of these is ethnic background, which showed a strong correlation to group commitment. He stated that apparently, "ethnicity grounds formation of a bounded status group" (p. 688), in that likeness tends to serve as a basis from which group solidarity is built. The second is a shared belief in otherworldly powers, to which rituals of commitment are directed. Both of these details add some indication as to *why* individuals generate attachment to community: Socioethnic religious ties can be a strong basis for the building of any community. To wit, this illuminates the significance of religion to historical ICs, which Mariampolski (1979) explained in that "[s]cholars of utopian communities have recognized the critical importance of religious conviction in generating the commitment necessary to ensure solidarity ties" (p. 217). Many famously long-lived communal experiments began as a group of migrants who started a new religious sect and migrated to the United States from their region in Europe to beget their experiment.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Sosis and Bressler (2003) tapped into Irons's (2001) theory of costly signaling to add further nuance to the understanding of commitment mechanisms. Using data compiled on 277 communes by Oved (1988) and spanning a time frame from 1663 to 1937, they found that the commitments which generated the highest level of community continuance were those that were "costly to fake." These included behaviors that required personal sacrifice because they must be done (or abstained from) publicly with the community: uniform clothing requirements, abstinence from alcohol, limited communication with outside persons, or surrendering of material possessions, for example.

But, these were historical research, done on communities long come and gone, mostly from the mid-nineteenth century. Kanter's metrics (and those from later authors in response), then, while useful to studying the legacy of such communities, hold diminished weight in telling us about the present *living* state of the movement. Most notably, the role of religion, while still present in many communities, has significantly declined as a defining feature. Today's ICs are more "eclectic" in nature, and more often strive to strike a balance between individual and communal needs (Smith 2002) while addressing myriad concerns such as climate change and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning rights through lifestyle rather than past experiments that predominantly emphasized human perfection in the eyes of a Christian god. Therefore, present-day communities need to be examined for continuance on their own terms, and "success" defined in said terms: How commitment and likely continuance are generated in a living, diverse movement. To harken back to Kanter (1972): What mechanisms of ICs today predict when what

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<sup>2</sup>For example, the historical Amana Colonies of Iowa were founded by German and Dutch migrants of the Inspirationist sect. Similarly, the Hutterites came to the United States from Moravia and settled throughout the north-central United States around the same time, and many of their communities persist today.

a person wants to do is matched with what they must do for their IC to survive? Wagner (1988) suggested that her 25-year mark is arbitrary and that community success should be measured by, among other things, the community's accomplishment of its own goals. Our sentiment is the same, and the present study addresses the other side of commitment and represents a move from testing whether commitment is generated by a given community to testing whether members of ICs feel that their commitment in community processes is beneficial to the community's vision.

In the absence of a crystal ball that predicts when current communities will eventually fail, we must make this determination on the basis of reported factors significant to today's ICs. Continuance in ICs, as it is in many countercultural institutions, is generated by a belief in what the group is doing and satisfaction with progress toward its goal. For example, Nepstad (2004) noted that in the radical Catholic Plowshares community, "[c]ontinuance commitment is formed when activists make extraordinary sacrifices for a movement, such as risking their own safety or forfeiting careers and relationships for a cause" (p. 47). Similarly, Antonovsky and Antonovsky (1974) found as much in a study of a living Israeli Kibbutzim (a manifestation of ICs with strong socioethnic religious ties), "the more satisfied an individual is, in terms of his overall social need satisfactions and in terms of specific areas of life, the more will he be committed to the social system" (p. 311). These underscore two important aspects to a newly developed measure: Commitment is important, but so is an individual's satisfaction with the community's goals and progress towards them.

Taken as a critique of Kanter's thesis, this offers a crucial alternative to a unidimensional understanding of commitment: Communitarians will be more likely to accede to commitments they believe in, or they themselves create through investments and commitments in the norm- and decision-making processes of the community.

## Data and methods

A common source for measuring the presence and shifts in the communities movement has been the directory of ICs created by the Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC)—a large international umbrella organization that maintains a database of more than 1,400 communities worldwide and publishes a paper copy of their collected data. This copy is published approximately every 5 years and has been used by other authors in time series analyses of the communities movement (Bader et al. 2006; Smith 2002). While an excellent, consistent set of data, it nonetheless is limited to the questions that FIC asks about registered members, few of which give us insight into dimensions of success crucial to the question at hand for this study.

To gather data for this project, we sought and were granted access to the FIC's listserv of those more than 1,400 currently registered ICs, to whom we sent an 80-question survey asking about various aspects of their communitarian lives. This data set is an inherently limited one, as there are a number of communities that, for one reason or another, chose not to register for the FIC's database (Bader et al. 2006). Therefore, the survey captures communities that have taken steps to show investment in the communities movement—a selection bias for the communities most involved in the broader discussion and movement about communal living.

We deployed the survey using the Survey Monkey platform and analyzed the data using STATA. There were 301 responses to the survey—a 22% response rate. However, many responses were incomplete, which left us with a total sample size of 215 after cleaning the data. Respondents included typically one representative per community, except for a few cases in which multiple respondents participated. While it would have been ideal to have every member respond, our aim was to include as many communities as possible, and we erred on the side of minimizing respondent burden to improve the overall response rate.

The sort of household-level equivalent response we sought does bias the nature of the answers received to some degree. Although we made it clear in the language of the survey that

respondents should answer as best they could “for the community” rather than themselves, this does introduce a not-insignificant level of subjectivity into the answers we received. However, previous studies that rely on the FIC directory’s data similarly rely on household-level-style responses, as the data contained in that base are similarly contributed by individual community representatives. Thus, our survey contains similar limitations to others already experienced by others in the field, ones that warrant continued attention as the study of ICs progresses.

Despite such limitations, the obtained sample was nonetheless fairly representative of the population of ICs in existence today. They were distributed by region in a way that closely mirrors their actual distribution: 30 (14%) were in the U.S. Northeast, 25 (12%) in the South, 20 (9%) in the Midwest, 84 (39%) in the West,<sup>3</sup> and 56 (26%) in other countries. Further, 69 (32%) respondents described their location as urban, 106 (49%) as rural, and 42 (19%) as suburban. A significant majority, 139 (72%), described their decision-making process as based on consensus rather than voting (26; 14%), community council (18; 9%), or following a sole leader (10; 5%), which reflects the increased popularity of that form in contemporary communities as compared to the popularity of charismatic sole leaders or voting in historical examples.

### **Dependent variable**

To test our definition of “success” for the respondent communities, we created a scale from a series of 13 questions about community processes and governance practices for which respondents were tasked with rating certain aspects of their community. The scale is as follows:

*Rate the following statement from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (10). My community’s decision-making process ...*

1. is functional
2. is complicated
3. has served us well so far
4. is fair to all involved
5. reflects our common values
6. needs to change for the community to be successful
7. excludes some voices\*
8. is perfect
9. has more flaws than the decision-making processes of other communities
10. involves everyone
11. has been the source of a lot of struggle in my community\*
12. is easy to understand
13. generally has a high satisfaction rating from members

\*The values for these questions were inverted in building the Satisfaction Scale.

Items for the scale were drawn from a number of sources about how decision making takes place in present-day ICs (Ergas 2010; Kasper 2008; Grinde et al. 2017; Ludwig 2017; Renz 2006; Smith 2002). Altogether, we believe this scale captures some sense of members’ satisfaction with their IC. This satisfaction scale shows high reliability (13 items;  $\alpha = .90$ ).

### **Independent variables**

Our first variable of concern comes from Kanter’s (1968, 1972) thesis and is the age of a community. We measured this in absolute years by asking respondents to give the age of their

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<sup>3</sup>Regions were defined using U.S. Census regional categorizations.



community. Similarly, given the importance in the literature of ethnic or religious homogeneity, we deployed several measures in our analysis to capture the levels of homogeneity within each community. Respondents were also asked about the racial composition of their community. From this, we built a dichotomous variable that indicates communities with a percentage of white members at or above 75%. Those above this threshold are coded as 1, and those below this threshold are coded as 0, to indicate significantly homogeneously white communities.

Additional measures of community homogeneity include shared political and religious backgrounds, traditions, or beliefs. Respondents were asked, “Is your community based on a specific political background, ideology, or tradition?” Communities that indicated their membership included a shared background in political beliefs are coded as 1; those that indicated they did not have this shared background are coded as 0. Similarly, respondents were asked if their community was “based on a religious background, ideology, or tradition.” Those who indicated a shared religious background are coded as 1; those who did not are coded as 0. These measures, combined with the predominance of white members in the community, provide some insight into how similar community members are to one another along racial, political, and religious lines.

To test the impact of commitment mechanisms on satisfaction, we built a scale of 11 items that communities use as criteria for membership. These include mechanisms such as the signing over of personal property, vows or oaths taken by community members, and abstention from certain activities/behaviors like alcohol consumption or sex. For example, respondents would answer whether “signing a contract or other legal agreement” was a requirement for joining the community. This scale shows moderate reliability (11 items;  $\alpha = .73$ ).

Few of the mechanisms for commitment that Kanter used in her analysis were present in any significant way among the communities studied, due in large part to the metamorphosis of the communities movement from being a primarily religious to a highly diverse phenomenon. Commitment mechanisms she included, such as the signing over of all personal property or abstention from alcohol or caffeine, were present in no more than a handful of communities. Our index, then, goes beyond hers and Hall’s (1988) gathering of variables by adding several commitment mechanisms likely to be found in present-day communities, based on literature about the state of the movement as it is today (Grinde et al. 2017; Ludwig 2017; Smith 2002)

Two measures of community decision-making are included—one that captures whether the community *practices* egalitarian decision-making, and another that captures whether the community has egalitarian decision-making *structures* in place. Thus, we have two variables about decision-making: one for structure (how the community envisions decision-making), and another for practice (how they actually make decisions).

To assess egalitarian practices, respondents were asked to identify a system that best matched their methods of major decision-making. They could choose among the following options: simple majority vote (50% plus one needed to pass a community decision), super majority vote (66% plus one needed to pass a community decision), consensus or modified consensus, community council, and sole leader. Each type of decision-making can be seen as residing on a spectrum of *how many* members it takes to pass a decision, from one (sole leader) on one end to everyone (consensus) on the other. More important though, the variable parses the decision-making philosophy of a given IC by distinguishing between those espousing egalitarian, democratic, or authoritarian tendencies. Egalitarian decision-making—or, consensus—has seen increasing popularity in ICs and is based on a rejection of the hierarchy and impersonality of democratic decision-making (Kasper 2008) or the complete lack of community participation found in sole leader structures. Those who chose consensus or modified consensus were considered to practice egalitarian decision-making and are coded as 1. Those who chose any other option, whether they were some type of democratic or authoritarian, are coded as 0.

To measure egalitarian structures in these communities, we asked respondents to indicate which of the following leadership structures best described their community: one leader who



makes all the decisions, a small group of leaders, no formal leader but informal leaders, no leader and members are functionally equal in decision-making. The final option is coded as 1 to indicate egalitarian decision-making structure, while all other options are coded as 0.

### **Analytic strategy**

Given the literature just reviewed, we proposed the following hypotheses to be tested in our analysis:

- H1: There is a positive relationship between community age and satisfaction with community governance.
- H2: There is a relationship between community homogeneity and satisfaction with community governance.
- H3: There is a positive relationship between commitment mechanisms and satisfaction with community governance.
- H4: There is a positive relationship between egalitarian decision-making practices and satisfaction with community governance.
- H5: There is a positive relationship between egalitarian decision-making structures and satisfaction with community governance.

Our analysis begins with a preliminary examination of descriptive statistics for the sample and then an investigation of bivariate relationships between key independent variables and satisfaction with community governance. The primary analysis is a series of nested, linear regression models aimed at testing Hypotheses 1–5. This method allows us to examine both the main influence of each variable as well as the collective impact of sets of conceptually similar variables on the overall explanation of variation in community satisfaction. Variables are introduced in a series of blocks, beginning with community age, then measures of community homogeneity/composition, followed by commitment mechanisms and finally decision-making characteristics.

### **Results**

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for key dependent and independent variables in our sample. On average, communities scored at 6.7 on the satisfaction scale. The average age of communities in our sample was just under 19 years. Most communities were predominantly white, with nearly 80% of all communities reporting a percentage of white members higher than 75%. Communities also appeared to be fairly homogenous along other indicators. Four in five communities shared a political background, tradition, or belief, while approximately three in four shared a religious background, tradition, or belief. Communities averaged 3.5 commitment mechanisms out of a list

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Dependent variable		
Satisfaction scale	6.70	1.64
Independent variables		
Community age	18.89	4.89
Predominantly white	.79	.40
Shared political background	.80	.40
Shared religious background	.74	.44
Commitment mechanisms	3.56	2.02
Egalitarian decision practice	.72	.45
Egalitarian decision structure	.34	.48

**Table 2.** Bivariate analysis of community satisfaction.

	<i>M (SD)</i>		<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	Yes	No		
Predominantly white	6.56 (1.70)	7.22 (1.39)	147	.056
Shared political background	6.79 (1.53)	6.36 (2.08)	151	.101
Shared religious background	6.69 (1.61)	6.74 (1.66)	154	.861
Egalitarian decision practice	6.76 (1.69)	6.53 (1.51)	154	.443
Egalitarian decision structure	7.16 (1.56)	6.41 (1.63)	150	.006

Note. Two-tailed *p* values.

**Table 3.** Regression models for community satisfaction.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Community age	-.011	-.012	-.012	-.012
Predominantly white		-.661*	-.651*	-.638*
Shared political background		.539	.524	.646*
Shared religious background		-.116	-.136	-.452
Commitment mechanisms			-.021	.031
Egalitarian decision practice				.352
Egalitarian decision structure				.879**
Constant	6.86	7.08	7.18	6.54
<i>df</i>	1	3	1	2
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.007	.044*	.045*	.111*

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. (hierarchical *F*-test *R*<sup>2</sup> change).

of 11. While many communities reported egalitarian decision-making practices (72%), those with egalitarian decision-making structures in place were less prevalent (34%).

Table 2 displays bivariate analyses of variance for community satisfaction across several dichotomous community factors. We find that communities reporting egalitarian decision-making structures have higher levels of satisfaction with community governance than those who do not, and that this difference is statistically significant (*p* < .01, two-tailed). We note that predominantly white communities also report low satisfaction on average and that this approaches significance at the *p* < .05 level but falls just outside this standard.

Table 3 presents the results for a multivariate hierarchical regression, wherein we nest four models of regression results to tease out main and collective effects. Model 1 examines the relationship between community age and community satisfaction—the relationship is not significant, and neither is the model. We find no support for the hypothesis that community age impacts community satisfaction. Model 2 examines the relationship between several indicators of community homogeneity and community satisfaction. Shared political and religious backgrounds are not significantly associated with community satisfaction; however, predominantly white communities are significantly associated with lower levels of community satisfaction. Communities that have a percentage of white members exceeding the threshold of 75% report levels of community satisfaction that are .661 lower than communities with white membership below that threshold. The *R*<sup>2</sup> for this model is low; however, the change in *R*<sup>2</sup> is significant as it rises to .044, suggesting this model accounts for slightly less than 5% of the variation in community satisfaction. Model 3 introduces the Commitment Mechanisms Scale. We find no relationship between the number of commitment mechanisms in place and community satisfaction; however, we see that *R*<sup>2</sup> change is significantly improved only slightly to .045. Finally, in model 4, we see the impact of decision-making practice and structures. There is no significant relationship between egalitarian decision-making practice and community satisfaction. There is a significant relationship, though, between egalitarian decision-making structures and community satisfaction. Communities with these structures in place, on average, report community satisfaction that is .879 higher than those who do not. Moreover, we see that the collective influence of egalitarian decision-making significantly

improves the amount of variation in satisfaction explained by our models—  $R^2$  jumps substantially to .111, and this is a statistically significant change. Our final model accounts for approximately 11% of variation in community satisfaction.

Altogether, we find partial support for Hypothesis 2 and full support for Hypothesis 5. We do not find support for Hypotheses, 1, 3, or 4. Simply put, when it comes to a measure of success focused on community satisfaction, predominantly white (over 75%) communities fare worse than the more diverse, while those who share some political background tend to fare better than those who do not. In addition, communities that put in place structures to ensure egalitarian decision-making fare better than those who have concentrated decision-making power in the hands of smaller groups or individuals. We also find no support for the claim that community age, shared religious backgrounds, commitment mechanisms, or reported egalitarian practices are significant predictors of success in terms of community satisfaction.

## Discussion

These findings have important implications for both ICs themselves and any group or body of people interested in organizing themselves for the purposes of collective action as an IC. The lessons from our analysis are as follows: Racial diversity is important to the success of modern communities, shared political intentions are helpful, and the satisfaction level of a community is overwhelmingly connected to the structural organization of decision-making.

Our finding that racial homogeneity is not supportive of community satisfaction might not be surprising in larger social contexts. But this is contrary to what much of the literature on historical communal movements has noted as the significance of ethnic and religious homogeneity to success as measured by longevity. This suggests a couple of important things: First, previous studies affirm only one of many possible successful communal arrangements. By introducing a definition of success that can be applied to living communities, we have found that ethnic and religious homogeneity is not a prerequisite to a successful IC. Second, homogeneity could be a confounding factor to the more likely reasons for a community success in past studies. Many of the subjects of those studies were highly homogenous groups of immigrants who settled in enclaves throughout North America or Israel, thus sometimes making their longevity a function of their religious and linguistic isolation in a new land rather than satisfaction with the intentions of the community and their achievement.

Key to this second point is our finding that structure is predictive of satisfaction while reported egalitarian practices are not. This indicates that social organization to promote egalitarian outcomes matters more than whether respondents perceive themselves as actually practicing egalitarian decision-making. In other words, it is important for communities to put in place structural mechanisms to promote egalitarian decision-making, regardless of whether they follow through with them completely in practice. This appears to generate satisfaction through the possibility of achieving shared goals, even as a community often falls short of including everyone in the process. Further, if communities do actually practice egalitarian decision-making, this may not be enough without structural organization conducive to that practice or intention.

Finally, indicators of egalitarian decision-making generally have better predictive value than measures such as community age or composition because they tell us something about the role of power in these communities, and whether power is promoting or oppressing people's sense of fairness and justice. Ultimately, if communities design/organize themselves in ways that promote egalitarian decision-making, they may be more likely to manifest satisfaction among members because they have enabled those members to feel included in achieving whatever goals or missions are central to the purpose of the community. This is a much broader and more purpose-oriented measure of success than simply community age in and of itself, which is neutral and not a determinant of community satisfaction in the pursuit of its goals.

These lessons provide an important update to previous ones taken from ICs of earlier times and contain analytical implications about the nature of ICs that cannot be garnered from the more basic descriptive data contained in the FIC database. We can see in the results of this survey how the proposition that communal living practiced by ICs is a reflection of the social ills of the day has merit, which reconfirms a host of existing literature on the topic (e.g., that the rise of religious communes in the 1840s coincided with the Second Great Awakening and a notable German religious pilgrimage). Where homogeneity was previously proven to be important to the success of historical ICs, though, today the more important factor is a community structure that promises egalitarianism. As the study of living ICs progresses, this thesis should be taken into account. Scholars of ICs should discuss and hypothesize links between the prevailing cultural norms (and ills) that form the backdrop against which these communities form, and how they succeed or fail.

## Conclusion

Existing studies of historical communal groups have examined—and largely supported—the notion that the success of communal groups is based on longevity and tied to commitment mechanisms. But, as we have introduced an alternative definition, that success can be measured by investment rather than commitment, a different picture of present-day ICs has emerged. ICs that have egalitarian governance structures prove to be a better predictor of community “success,” because they are based on whether communitarians play a role in the successes of their community. Age, commitment mechanisms, and homogeneity seem to hold less relevance under this definition, and the latter two are notably less present in the ICs of today than those of the past.

By redefining the measure of success in ICs, we also recenter the answer to that question on to the very nature of the communities themselves. ICs are collections of small groups of people who seek to make a claim about how society should be through creating their own living example. As noted from Pitzer (1989), ICs are a generic social change mechanism available to all people at all times, and so the reasons for communitarian living, while varied, are nonetheless wrapped up in experimental alternatives to prevailing social norms. It should not matter how long that experiment lasts, then, but rather whether the communitarians party to the experiment come to define it as successful through their participation in its vision.

While this study makes significant contributions to the literature on IC success, there are also several limitations that future research should aim to improve. First, we rely on cross-sectional survey data, which does not allow us to determine causality. Furthermore, the sample size of this study is a serious limitation; however, this is a population that can be difficult to survey and for whom there are no other data sources. Second, we have relied on spokespersons for each community to limit respondent burden and increase the number of responses; however, spokespersons might be inclined to provide responses that portray their communities in the best light. Future researchers should develop an approach that can reduce both respondent burden and reliance on spokespersons. A shorter survey, including what we now know to be critical variables, distributed to random samples of community members should be the aim. Third, the sample is heavily biased toward respondents from North America, which is reflective of the overall demographic bias of the FIC database itself. Despite it being an international organization, most ICs registered with the FIC are in North America. Future work should also consider how international ICs could be disambiguated and studied on their own terms. Finally, while the low percentage of variation in success accounted for in our models partially reflects our attempt to keep them parsimonious, this is a limitation that could be improved on as researchers work to determine the most important predictors of IC success. We hope that future researchers will build on our work and utilize the measure of success among ICs we have developed in this study.

## Author notes

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