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The Meaning
of *Consensus* and *Blocking*
for Cohousing Groups

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This study examined the meanings of *consensus* and a *block of consensus* for 47 residents of one forming and three formed cohousing communities. Interviews revealed that the groups in this study constructed the meaning of consensus in their communities over time. Residents' metaphors for consensus revealed a multilayered and often contradictory understanding of consensus as a process that was capable of leading to a decision no member had previously envisioned, to increased member insight, and to firmer relationships within the group. Descriptions of a consensus block revealed themes related to the motives for blocking and to the pivotal role blocking has in improving the group's thinking, stopping its progress, transforming its energy, isolating members, or building community.

Keywords: *consensus; consensus block; decision making; decision rules; metaphors; cohousing*

Consensus decision making has drawn repeated attention during several decades from group communication scholars. Such attention is unlikely to diminish because in recent times there has been "an explosion of interest in consensus" (Schaub, 1999, p. iv). It is used in handling community development efforts (Potapchuk, 1995), environmental issues (Bonnicksen, 1996; Fischer, 1997; Lubell, 2000; Turcotte & Pasquero, 2001), and a wide range of public policy disputes (Jones, 1994). Consensus is the decision

rule of choice in groups committed to cooperative activity (Gastil, 1993; Wood, 1984). A fuller understanding of consensus is important, given both that "consensus is a disarmingly complex concept" (VanLear & Mabry, 1999, p. 30) and that our society's emphasis on competition leads to diminished familiarity with and comfort in using a cooperative decision-making approach such as consensus (Jones, 1994).

Limits in the Current Understanding of Consensus

The body of consensus research is characterized by inconsistencies in the definitions of consensus. DeStephen and Hirokawa (1988) noted that "the operationalization of consensus may be confusing and even contradictory across a number of studies" (p. 227). The difficulties begin with the fact that some researchers consider consensus to be a product, whereas others view it as a process. The studies that consider consensus as a product vary in the product they describe. It is most commonly defined as a unanimous agreement with a proposal (Davis, Kameda, Parks, Stasson, & Zimmerman, 1989; Gouran, 1969; Hornsby, Smith, & Gupta, 1994; Kameda & Sugimori, 1995; Knutson, 1972; Knutson & Holdridge, 1975; Sager & Gastil, 1999; Schwenk & Valacich, 1994; VanLear & Mabry, 1999), but it has also been defined as a solution that satisfies all members or incorporates all points of view (Hare, 1980), near unanimous agreement (Kline & Hullinger, 1973), at least partial agreement of all members with the decision (Nemiroff & King, 1975), full acceptance by all members of the logic and feasibility of a group's recommendations (Priem & Price, 1991; Schwenk & Cosier, 1993), or less than full satisfaction with the group's final recommendations or assumptions (Schweiger, Sandberg, & Ragan, 1986). Some researchers have defined consensus operationally by measuring the degree of members' agreement with a group's position (Collins-Jarvis, 1997; Gouran & Geonetta, 1977; Hill, 1976; Knutson & Kowitz, 1977) or the distance of individual members from the group's position (Kline, 1972), whereas others measured the members' satisfaction with the decision (DeStephen, 1983).

In research that has treated consensus as a process, groups are often told what behaviors to perform during their discussions if they are in the "consensus condition." Not only are there inconsistencies in the instructions for performing consensus (compare, for instance, Tjosvold & Field, 1985, with Hornsby et al., 1994), but also it is unclear whether in the short time between receiving instructions and beginning discussions participants can remember and master the instructions to practice consensus as it has been defined.

Because consensus can legitimately be considered both a product and a process, a group might follow a consensus process without reaching consensus, especially within an initial discussion of an issue, a factor that few studies have considered. In fact, studies that define consensus as a product rather than a process exclude, by definition, such instances from consideration. Yet a full appreciation of consensus requires acknowledging the possibility of failing to reach consensus when someone voices opposition to a position on which a group might otherwise agree.

Some prior research has acknowledged the pivotal role of opposition to an understanding of consensus. Lonowski (1994) argued that the ability of consensus to protect the minority in Native American tribes was derived from the potential for someone who opposed an agreement to leave the group and begin a new group. The consensus handbook edited by the Center for Conflict Resolution (1999) includes a position statement from one contributor that "the right of an individual to 'block' a decision endorsed by the rest of the group is the cornerstone of the consensus decision-making process" (p. 35). Yet the meaning of blocking consensus to those who are committed to its use as a decision rule has not received the attention of researchers.

In addition to this limitation and the considerable variation in definitions of consensus used in earlier research, even when broadly accepted definitions are used, a deep understanding of what consensus means to those committed to its use seems elusive. Thus, Sager and Gastil (1999) recommended "probing more deeply into individuals' understandings of consensus" (p. 78). Qualitative research approaches, in particular in-depth interviews, are especially suited to the task of uncovering meanings (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The research reported here used interviews to determine what meanings consensus and the act of blocking consensus have for members of ongoing groups who use a consensus rule for making decisions. To accomplish this task, the research involved the participation of residents of cohousing communities.

Cohousing communities are multigenerational, resident-designed and managed neighborhoods that incorporate privately owned, single-family units with jointly owned community space—typically a community garden, workshop, and common house. The common house extends the living space available in individual homes. In its kitchen, members prepare some community meals each week. The dining room doubles as a meeting room for the regular (typically semimonthly) meetings the communities hold to manage their property (Hanson, 1996; McCamant, Durrett, & Hertzman, 1994). In committee meetings and in the general community meeting, group

members make a multitude of group decisions—on meal menus, ways to enhance the community property, or strategies to cope with conflict between residents. As the Cohousing Association of the United States (2004) says, typically cohousing communities make decisions by consensus.

Method

With cohousing communities as the site for research, this study involved natural, ongoing, bona fide groups whose consensus decisions affect them in potentially significant ways. As one participant said, "You can't just get mad and go away, because you own your house."

Research Participants

Participants in the research were members of four cohousing groups who volunteered to be interviewed. I sent invitations to participate in the research to cohousing communities listed on the Cohousing Association's Web site within a specific 300-mile, two-state range. Members of four groups indicated their willingness to be interviewed. A contact person in each group initiated interaction with me, provided directions to the community, introduced me to residents, and maintained contact with me after my visit. To protect the privacy of the participants, I selected pseudonyms for each community; the pseudonyms for individuals were self-selected.

The oldest of the communities, Dogwood Commons Cohousing, was completed in the early 1990s after years of planning. Located on the outskirts of a large city, it has 24 housing units. Seven residents were interviewed, ranging from a renter of 5 months to a founding member who had been part of the group for 17 years. The group had just built an attractive patio outside of their common house, a project initially blocked by a member.

Two of the communities were completed in 2000. Cormorant Commons has 26 units on its site in a suburb of another large city. That community had experienced several blocks. One had blocked the purchase of two units by a couple who had earlier left the group during its preconstruction period; others stopped a proposal for allocating storage space and attempts to adopt a pet policy. I interviewed 13 residents of Cormorant Commons. The other group of the same age, Birch Haven Cohousing, is a 32-unit community on the outskirts of a midsized city. Efforts to place items acquired by the community (e.g., a hot tub and playground equipment) had resulted in blocks; also,

I observed a near block of a plan to pave a parking area after a yearlong deci-sion process.[1] I interviewed 22 current residents and 1 former resident.

The final community, Aspen Ridge Cohousing, was in the process of forming when the research was done. The 8 individuals involved in the community hoped to build an 18-unit development in the center of a large city on a plot adjacent to another large, already formed community. They had anticipated building within 2 years but have since disbanded. Four group members participated in this research, all of whom indicated that their group had had little experience with consensus but each of whom had ideas about how the process would work.

Participants included 31 women and 16 men whose involvement in their communities ranged from 2 months to 17 years. Participants' ages ranged from the late 20s to the early 80s. Many were retired; the careers of those still employed were wide ranging but included positions in education, psy-chology, medicine, law, retail, and engineering.

Interviews

Long interviews were conducted in places selected by the interviewees: 11 in a quiet room in the group's common house, 31 in someone's home, 3 in nearby restaurants, and 1 at the participant's workplace**.** In nearly every case, one person was interviewed at a time, even when both partners in a couple were interviewed. However, in two cases, other individuals at home during an interview added some comments, and in one case, a couple sug-gested that they be interviewed together. The interview of the couple was nearly 2 hours long; other interviews ranged from 45 to 75 minutes, with most interviews lasting 1 hour.

Interviews used a semistructured schedule of questions, which were adapted to the circumstances described by the participants. In each case, I asked questions to discover the meanings that the participants attached to consensus and to the act of blocking consensus. I asked what meanings they had attached to the terms when they first learned that their communities would make decisions by consensus and how the meanings had changed over time. In all cases, an audiotape recording was made of the interview; the tapes were then transcribed.

Analysis

To analyze the data, I read and reread interview transcripts, noting in early readings the metaphors for consensus embedded in the responses,

whether explicitly or implied in the verbs and adjectives used to describe the decision-making process. In subsequent readings, I paid particular attention to the metaphors.[2] After marking relevant sections of the transcripts during the readings, I put excerpts on note cards, indexing each with the participant's name, community, and length of participation in the group. I separated the note cards about consensus from those about blocking and then sorted cards into subcategories of themes. I tested the consistency of statements within each category (and maintained the deviations) by labeling each resulting pile of cards and noting the comments on the cards within the category. Then I looked between categories for commonalities, which allowed me to see relationships among the themes that had emerged and to refine the categories. I created an outline of the themes, which I e-mailed to each contact person to check for the apparent validity of my observations. The contact person from each completed community sent reactions to the outline, and one individual who had not been interviewed earlier e-mailed me his observations on consensus. I sent a completed draft to each community so residents could verify that I had represented their comments accurately and had protected their privacy. I sent a later draft to the communities to solicit responses to questions raised by a reviewer.

Results

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed (a) the way in which meaning for the consensus process is constructed in a group, (b) metaphors that reflect varied meanings of consensus, and (c) themes revealing the meanings of a block.

Constructing the Meaning of Consensus

As might be expected, a group's experience with consensus decision making over time helps to create a shared meaning for consensus within the community. Participants in this research who had been in other consensus groups reinforced what my observations told me: there is no single form of consensus. Some differences in the performance of consensus are superficial. For instance, two of the groups use color-coded cards to signal consensus (Birch Haven with a green card and Cormorant Commons with a blue card). Dogwood Commons has abandoned the use of cards; its members wriggle their fingers as a sign of support for a proposal. Some process distinctions are more significant: Cormorant Commons has a

process for making "small decisions" without full group interaction, and Birch Haven has recently amended its consensus process to clarify when the group can vote on decisions if consensus has not been reached. Beyond these differences in performance lie differences in meaning.

The members of Aspen Ridge Cohousing provided a sharp contrast to the others in the depth of their meaning for consensus. Although their perceptions often paralleled those of participants from established communities, the members of Aspen Ridge consistently claimed that their group had made few significant decisions because the crucial decisions—about land and layout—had been made by the developer before the cohousing group began. Most of the group's decisions concerned marketing the project to attract additional members and setting meeting times and places. Yet individual group members told me of decisions the group had made without using a consensus process: whether to involve a developer or architect with prior experience with cohousing, what consultant to select for the development process, and whether to allocate group monies to support one member's attendance at a conference. Clearly, the first step in understanding consensus for those becoming members of a consensus group is recognizing what is no longer a matter of individual choice but a decision for the group to make.

The Meaning of Consensus

Metaphors embedded in participants' responses revealed a depth of meaning for consensus. Some metaphors illuminated the process of consensus; others focused on the product. Each metaphor has implications for the way the residents perform consensus.

Process

Six metaphors relate to the consensus process. They differ in their depictions of the process as practical or mystical, active or passive, and positive or negative.

A tool. The most pragmatic, utilitarian view of consensus likened it to a tool. Jeff, a resident of Birch Haven, developed the metaphor most explicitly when he said,

> You know, the purpose of our community is not to practice consensus in its highest form. Consensus is a tool that we use to learn to live with each other. I mean, it's a *tool*. And sometimes you use a hammer, and sometimes you use a screwdriver.

The tool metaphor also appeared in others' descriptions of consensus, as in Sunshine's concern that at Birch Haven, "we won't learn to use the tool, and . . . it will work more against us than for us," or August's description of work on the pet policy at Cormorant Commons: "We'd hammered at it and hammered at it and hammered at it for several meetings in a row, and people kept disagreeing." The tool described may be less like a hammer than a chisel ("tap into their creativity and not squelch it") or a pair of tongs that pull out voices, concerns, and wisdom from group members. A tool metaphor suggests limits to a group's commitment to the consensus process. Some people do have an intense connection with their tools, but, as Griffin (2003) wrote, "tools are *things* purchased at a hardware store. Tools can be picked up or turned on, and just as easily put down or switched off. We can be detached from a tool" (p. 405).

Magic. Magic captures our attention by transforming our sense of what is real and possible. Vince's description of his first experience with consensus in cohousing brought to mind the image of someone determined to understand the magic:

> I saw a two-line ad in a local paper. Went to a meeting. They were introducing cohousing to people, and the group did everything by consensus. And I said, "That's impossible. A group can't do that. It just won't work." So I kept coming back to try and figure out how this is happening. After about three meetings, I was convinced I wanted to stay.

One new cohousing resident, J, told me that consensus "gives the illusion of complete agreement, but I think it IS an illusion." However, her neighbor, Sara, expressed admiration for the positive synergy she had noticed in smaller groups: "That magic thing when the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts, and this magic happens and conflict is resolved and consensus emerges." Another neighbor, Mark, described the work of an effective outside facilitator who succeeded in creating real agreement: "There are things that I can identify, and there are things that I just can't—that I think are just *magic* in some form."

Magic always maintains a sense of mystery. As such, it will retain its appeal for those who enjoy its intrigue and are comfortable with ambiguity. For others, magic may be less appealing than a tool that comes with instructions and, after practice, can be used with skill.

Traveling on a path, often in a car. A common metaphor for consensus evokes movement down a path, often in a vehicle. Sometimes the process

"goes real smoothly," especially if it does not "take twists and turns that were unexpected" and is headed down a "path that more people can follow." At other times, the process leads to "getting stuck," and people "get bogged down and stall out and [do] not go anywhere," at least until someone has an idea "that opens a path for further movement," or people "shift gears" or "push it in the direction where it looks like a solution might lie." The rest of the group members could "dig their feet in" and prevent further movement, or they might "find their way" to a solution that is acceptable and to the attitude that a solution that meets the needs of others will be acceptable even if not ideal.

The destination of the travel was described as getting "to yes" and "upward" to "the pinnacle" of a very good solution, far from "the muck" of compromise. The process is active rather than passive and often arduous. It may require a "shepherd" to guide a proposal through the process; a member seeking influence "can't sit in the back seat."

The travel is not speedy; it takes place on a path, not a highway. The metaphor draws attention to the assumption that consensus moves forward toward a destination and thus accentuates the frustration some may feel when it stalls. J's 2 months at Birch Haven had included the near block of the paving project, which had raised doubts about consensus:

> I just don't think that it's a realistic form of governing. You know what? If somebody's damn house is on fire and there's some reason that we haven't had consensus, damned if I'm going to sit and talk about the stupid process.

Individuals with more experience with consensus—and more distance from a difficult decision—may be less pessimistic. Mickey, who had 7 years of experience on and off with Cormorant Commons, reported that "people are kind of amazed that with consensus we can still get through our business topics pretty quickly." Yet her neighbor, Irene, suggested that frustration is still associated with consensus in their community: "Privately what people say about consensus is it's a pain in the butt. But, see, there's this value placed on it that makes it a little hard to sometimes be that honest."

A river. A river metaphor represents the views of those who see consensus as a fluid process. A single meeting might be described as "really very fluid; it just moved right along," or the whole process might be described as flowing to its conclusion. Individual group members may "just go with the flow," although "some people contribute more to the flow of the decision process" than others. Some group members find it difficult to adjust to the

fluid nature of consensus. Alicia, a resident of Birch Haven, explained that "it has no boundaries. I don't know my role . . . . It's very difficult because it challenges you to come out of a fairly concrete role and be more fluid and more spontaneous."

At times, the river is murky. Betty, of Birch Haven, explained: "It's slower and it's not always clear what's going on. And it's dependent to a certain extent on the facilitator to make things flow." When it moves quickly, the force of the river may frighten those who oppose the emerging consensus, as Mike, a Birch Haven resident who had opposed the community's paving decision, suggested when he reflected on his experience:

> There's too much pressure on views that are not the mainstream to really, in my mind, be a valid consensus process. [With] some other process, maybe two thirds majority, . . . I can express my true honest view without having to wrestle with, "Do I want to buck this massive river that's flowing against me?" . . . That's a lot of pressure. It's almost a physiological response that I have. It still feels strong enough at some level that it's hard to imagine wanting to get in the way of that river.

Like travel on a path, the river metaphor implies movement. However, the fluid river image suggests a natural, continuous movement more independent of members' control.

An open space or circle. Some descriptions of consensus depicted a setting. Sara described an ideal process as providing

> some way to make a clearing where we can all step out of what we came in wanting, expecting, hoping for, etc., and stand in a place together where we can begin to see a new way or something different.

In her earlier experiences with consensus, group members would sit in a circle and speak in turn, and "by the time the circle had been completed, consensus had emerged . . . from everybody putting their piece of truth in the center." Sara's experience in her 5 years at Birch Haven was not as positive: "We haven't learned how to make that loving, gentle, joyous space where we can actually hear each other."

Other cohousing residents also used a space metaphor, describing it as a "deeper place" outside of the self, an open space with room for "other possibilities," "a space where you're laughing at each other or at yourself," where "what you did outside can immediately change as soon as you get in

that circle." This metaphor suggests a different mindset from the previous two, with their focus on movement and destination. In the open space, consensus occurs free from pressure. The slowness of travel on a road is frustrating, and a slow river is murky, but, in the clearing, the slow pace of consensus is expected and honored. Moreover, the circle that exists in the open space places all members equidistant from the center of power. It is clearly different from the instance John, a resident of Birch Haven, described with frustration when someone used "a chunk of time at the meeting to have this stump and get up on it and proselytize."

Massaging, molding. Petra described a transformation in her feelings about consensus during her 5 years at Dogwood Commons. Initially dismayed by the lengthy discussions, she walked out of meetings thinking, "They've massaged that to death." Now she stays through meetings, but the metaphor remains unchanged. She describes her current positive view of consensus as people listening to each other as they share opinions, "massaging those opinions."

Closely linked with the massage metaphor is the image of a consensus group molding a decision until something unimagined emerges. August described it as a process in which a group puts an issue on the table and keeps "passing it around, and talking about it, and turning it, and kneading it, and prodding it, and shaping it this way and shaping it that way, till finally we get something we can all live with." Although a massage improves the health and functioning of something that already exists by working out its kinks, molding creates a new object unrecognizable in an unformed lump of clay. Both, however, are active, hands-on processes that require repeated reworking to be successful.

Battle. The difficulties encountered with consensus were reflected in the war metaphor adopted by some residents at both Birch Haven and Cormorant Commons. Residents know "that we're going to have to defend our position" and may get help from others ("She is a great trooper if you get her in your camp because you can say, 'charge,' and she'll run to the front."). At times, the battle was at the center of the consensus experience; Roxie felt that at Cormorant Commons, she had to "muster up strength . . . put on my armor . . . to go into battle." Finally, she withdrew from meetings because, she said, "I lost my might. I lost my fight." Another resident of Cormorant Commons peppered his comments about positions he took in a discussion with the sound effect "boom," suggestive of weapons being

fired. A battle metaphor also suggests as active—but far more adversarial—a process as that implied by any of the other metaphors.

Product

Three metaphors describe the outcome of consensus. Each of them identifies a positive outcome, whether for the decision itself, self-understanding, or community relationships.

Synthesis. Residents at each of the formed communities described the ideal product of consensus as something different from its components or from compromise. Divergent ideas are "pulled together in synthesis," creating a "synergy of everybody's ideas, information, opinions, feelings." Group members may "weave into" someone's unexpected suggestion. The final product represents contributions of the entire group. With a woven product, recognizably distinct contributions from individuals can be identified; if the product is a synthesis, the outcome has so transformed the initial contributions that one could not unweave it to find the original threads.

Insight. A second view of the consensus product is insight into one's self or one's group. Consensus led to personal insight (about "my way of fighting my way, tooth and claw, out of the way that I was raised"), which could then form the foundation for personal growth ("sometimes really painful, but on the other hand, I would never have done it this fast"). A longer view allowed learning about the community—"to take the helicopter position and look down at the room and say, 'Ahh! That's what's going on.'"

At times the perspectives gained from the lenses are not aligned with one another. Timothy described efforts to resolve the image as members "keep bouncing their own feelings off that emerging alignment." In this way, a clear image of the relationship between the self, the community, and the proposal should emerge.

Mortar. Participants frequently mentioned that consensus plays a vital role in building community. As Jim said, "Consensus seeking isn't something that you do. It's something you build." Consensus decisions in cohousing groups do, literally, build communities and do so by reflecting their members' wishes. Even when a few group members who are heavily invested in a particular decision push for a resolution, others should not let the few make a decision for the rest "because then it would be their community and everybody else would just be hanging around the fringes." By

inviting, listening to, and respecting each member's voice, consensus functions as the mortar that joins the individuals together into a firmer, collaborative community.

The Meaning of Blocking Consensus

Participants in this research shared the perception that a single group member can block an emerging consensus. (Some individuals did wish that the number were higher than one, and some wished they could limit the number of times any one person could block.) Most consensus groups expect that a block will reflect an individual's concern that the proposal would put the community at risk. Some consensus handbooks, such as the one by Butler and Rothstein (1991) used at Birch Haven, even suggest that a block can be declared illegitimate—and ignored—if it is based on personal, rather than community, concerns. This broad sketch of the nature of a block is shaded by the themes that emerged from the interviews concerning the motivation for a block, the effect on the decision made, and the effect on relationships in the community. Participants' perceptions of these themes differed within and between communities.

Motivation

Two themes emerged from the interviews on the motivation for blocking. The first saw a block as stemming from fear. Several residents observed that fear lay under their own or others' opposition to some proposals. Judy, at Birch Haven, described an incident when Diane had blocked a plan for sharing responsibilities to clean the common house. Judy saw the block as nothing that was hostile or "drama making" because Diane was "utterly authentic and sincere in her distress." (Interestingly, when Diane described that decision, she said she had expressed her concern early, so that it was not an actual block.) Louise, from Cormorant Commons, explained her experience with blocking in terms of fear:

> This is how it's been for me: I have some need. I have not fully identified it. I have not, myself, heard it. And I have limited means to satisfy that need of my own. I need for these people to somehow make it—this fearful thing that I really fear worse than death—not happen for me, I hope. Otherwise, I will have to leave this comfy place. It won't be home for me if this fearful thing comes to pass.

Louise acknowledged that sometimes a skilled facilitator is able to draw the concern out of a person "in a way that the rest of the group can understand,

'Oh, that's what you fear. Oh, that's what you need.'" If not, the fear will motivate a block.

The prospect of unarticulated fear leading someone to block consensus brought responses that ranged from empathy to frustration. August elaborated on the frustration:

> There are members here who haven't yet chosen to trust the community with the data that they're not sharing. And that's . . . sad. That's too bad. It's frustrating. Pisses me off a little bit. They don't share the data. So it's more from voice tones, and the short clipped sentences, and the body posture than, "Well, this brings up my issues around authority, and I really don't want to go there, so I'm going to block this." Nothing that clear.

When I asked if perhaps some individuals are not fully clear about the source of their fear, August continued, "Possibly. And we are not invited to help explore it with them."

The second perceived motive for a block—the desire for control—raised more consistently negative reactions. Participants said groups were "overrun" by a "hysterical" minority "in a position to tyrannize," that functioning fell apart when one person wanted to have "the center of the stage and be important" or used the threat of a block as a "tactic to strengthen their position"—as a "power play" or a "kind of blackmail"—to "hold hostage everyone else."

Antoinette, a member of the forming community, anticipated that she would rethink her participation in the group "if somebody's going to be that strong" as to block consensus. Many residents of formed communities reported that, for them, living in community involved realizing that individual preferences did not need to be satisfied on all—or even most—decisions. Most expressed less concern with a blocker's strength of feeling than with the frequency of opposition: "For some of the frequent blockers, I think their blocks are just one tool in a bag of strategies." An individual's need for control was regarded as an unacceptable (but not uncommon) motive for blocking in a cohousing community.

Effect on the Decision

Three themes that related to the effect of a block on the decision outcome emerged.

Improving the decision. The first, that it might improve the decision, is consistent with the consensus philosophy that one member's opposition can

illuminate an important, but overlooked, piece of the truth. Lea described a block as "that ultimate strong statement from the few that has to be paid a lot of attention." Mark added, "I can sense how that would feel inside to be that person and feel like, 'Well, they don't get it. I get it, and it's up to me to hold firm.'"

Residents at each completed community confirmed a block's potential to improve a decision. Judy, at Birch Haven, said she loved recognizing the validity of what initially seemed to be "somebody coming in from left field about some bizarre objection." Her neighbor, Lou, said, "If somebody actually does block, it's usually, in the long run, a better outcome, because that particular whatever-it-was shouldn't have happened." When I asked Mickey, at Cormorant Commons, whether a block improved the quality of decisions, she answered, "No. Well, no, wait. It has on occasion. And that's one of the things that makes it valuable." Irene agreed:

> We've had experiences that we needed to have, where an essential piece of truth comes out because of the block; but the trouble is that, when it comes out that way, it's so painful for some of the people that were involved in the process that they can't hear it. Some people who are a little less invested can hear it, and they go, "Eh, that's a really important piece."

During the development of Dogwood Commons, the residents had experienced an important block, which Naomi described:

> I blocked the decision on choosing an architect for the site. We had gone through a whole interview process, and the group was leaning toward one architect. I had very strong personal feelings that it was not the right architect for the project. I have architectural training, so I could hold it and verbalize it in a certain way. But it was hard for me to communicate it so that other people got the strength of my feeling. And so, when it came down to the decision, I blocked the decision—just 'cause I was very uncomfortable. The group was totally supportive of that and said, "What do you need?"

The community asked Naomi to invite the architect in question to make a second presentation that would address Naomi's concerns. After the second presentation, the rest of the group agreed that the architect was not a good fit for them. Naomi reflected on the importance of that experience to the group's learning about blocking:

> There was tremendous trust in me, that if I really had an issue, that it maybe was in the best interest of the group for us to relook at this. We didn't easily

block things at that point. People knew that you don't block just because you're pissed off. There was a clear thing that you thought was going in the wrong direction.

The experience of this early block seems to have laid the foundation for a positive attitude toward blocking that remains. Timothy, a new resident, believes that a block, or even the fear of one, encourages more careful thinking about issues involved in a decision as group members watch to see whether something is missing in their thinking. Olympia reported that blocks have "accounted for issues that are sometimes obscure, but there's something in them that needs to be addressed." The residents of Dogwood Commons have made an effort to ensure that the issues are articulated. Eddy told me that after 7 years as an established community, the group began to demand an explanation from anyone who blocked or stood aside from a decision. Without a reason, "there was always that vacuum. It's never satisfying."

Stopping group activity. The residents of both Birch Haven and Cormorant Commons described experiences with blocks that had stopped the work of the group. Both of those communities use color-coded cards to manage discussions and to reveal members' positions during a consensus check. Thus, as Emma explained,

> To block, I would use the red card . . . . And it means that that decision—it's not going to happen, even if everybody in the community wanted it except me . . . until I'm willing maybe to compromise. But at least you can stop the action.

Two of Emma's neighbors at Cormorant Commons commented that blocks had, in fact, stopped the group. August, who had lived there for 2 years, said, "I have not seen a decision that was blocked come back and get passed in another format." In Glenn's experience of nearly 8 years in the group, he had found that "what replaces a blocked decision is usually no decision . . . which is a decision, I guess." José, a resident of Birch Haven, saw a block as having the potential to keep discussion going but a reality that was often different:

> If it worked in its best form, it would keep things open instead of closing things down and would keep people involved as opposed to the way people slam the door and [say], "Ha Ha! I just succeeded in stopping something."

The experience at Cormorant Commons, in particular, seemed to be that a block stopped the group's work short, so that, in Irene's words, "a block is a failure." The language used by residents at Birch Haven and Cormorant Commons underscored the sense of failure associated with it. Sometimes the failure was akin to a mechanical malfunction so that consensus was "stuck" or "stalled" at an impasse, brought "to a screeching halt," "derailed," or "had a wrench thrown in it." Sometimes the failure was more organic: "falling flat," "paralyzing the group," or "leading to total stagnation." In other descriptions, the block took on the more sinister tones of a war metaphor; it could "torpedo the work of committees" or cause group members to have "rolled over and played dead to the red cards."

Blocks that stop action may be more likely in cohousing groups once the site is developed. Vince, who experienced the development of Cormorant Commons, claimed that

> before the housing was done, consensus was very important, because the dream kind of ended right there if you couldn't reach consensus. Now we're built; the dream is realized. And people—some people—don't feel the need to finish something . . . . Now if something doesn't get solved, the world doesn't end.

The failure to decide can negatively impact a group. Geranium described her reaction to blocked decisions at Birch Haven: "Well, I've seen me and others say, 'Oh shit.' And they go home and don't participate for a while. And that's very hurtful." Several residents of Cormorant Commons described the negative impact of unresolved issues on their community as "wearing on us," which "breaks the bond of trust," hurting the community because "it's left an item that we really can't talk about," creating "a fair number of things that are sort of off limits, and that gets really draining after a while. That's when life starts to feel like a series of grinding compromises, and you slip into grudging silence." Participants who focused on a block's power to stop activity did not see that as a good thing that moved the community away from an unwise course of action but rather as a move that left unresolved issues buried in silence.

Shift in energy. Some groups see a block as a transformative tool that shifts the energy within a group toward discovering a new solution. Timothy, a resident of Dogwood Commons, described it as creating "an entirely new rhythm . . . a bit like meditation." The energy-shifting theme was most evident in the interviews of Birch Haven residents. Betty explained that "blocking is not the end of a proposal; it's a stop and reevaluate" that comes with

the responsibility to "be part of the solution." Alicia added, "What it means is as I block, I become the mover of whatever the momentum is. I'm not really stopping. I'm changing the energy." Two other residents stressed that this function of blocking is impaired if a group member "disappears" after blocking or threatening to block a proposal. One explained that a former resident had followed that pattern, which left the group unable to talk about, let alone resolve, issues. Shortly after I interviewed members of the group, Birch Haven amended its consensus process to mandate that a blocker assume the responsibility to reach an acceptable resolution to the issue.

Effect on Relationships

Two themes describe the impact of a consensus block on relationships within a group. The two are diametrically opposed in the impacts they reveal.

Isolating a community member. The participants in this research acknowledged that a block distanced members of the community from one another. Two members of Birch Haven described their feelings when a proposal they had worked hard at implementing was blocked. Geranium, in discussing a near block on the proposal to pave the parking area, said, "I felt demeaned and discounted at that meeting." Miriam had a similar reaction to a block of the common house cleaning proposal:

> A lot of work—I mean a lot of work—had gone into coming up with what seemed to us a really equitable plan and something we thought would really motivate everybody. And for one person to hold it all up felt really invalidating.

Although group members whose work has been rejected will feel distanced by a block, it is the blocker who experiences the greatest sense of isolation. In Timothy's half year at Dogwood Commons, he had already come to recognize the fact that "it's extremely difficult, emotionally and socially, for a person who blocks." His explanation emphasized the communication difficulties inherent in blocking:

> My hunch is that there are skills that people could use so that they could block gracefully. It's just that if you get to the place where you have to block, you are so into your own deeply help conviction that it's the best you can do just to say, "No!" You gotta be pushed hard. So, the social skills around that are interesting. How can a person do that and say, "I love you all. I'm still a member of this community. I still want you to like me. I still want you to come over on Saturday for tea. But the answer's no." That's very difficult.

The experience of isolation stimulated by a block differed for the participants interviewed. For instance, after a couple's application to purchase units at Cormorant Commons was blocked, one member stopped participating in community meetings. A founding member of Birch Haven who frequently blocked or threatened to block proposals moved away. Irene, a resident of Cormorant Commons, said of a block,

> It's really heavy when it happens. I mean, it's like in a marriage where they just can't agree on something, and a person says, "Well, then, let's go to a marriage counselor," and the other person says no. Well, then what do you do?

The reactions, although intense, are often temporary, according to Lauren, a resident of Birch Haven who likened it to a family dispute: "You get used to the way people express anger or frustration. If you're an outsider— a guest in the house—it freaks you out a little bit. But if that's what you're used to, you know it goes away."

Building community. Although residents at each community acknowledged the potential for a block to divide the community, at each community there were residents who saw the opposite potential: a block could build community. Two members of Aspen Ridge envisioned a block as building "a stronger community because you establish more trust by working through these things without getting angry or feeling threatened" and "you'll fight—nicely—for what you believe in and what you want and need, and everyone else around you understands the same idea about blocking, so they don't take it personally." Their optimism might have dimmed had they experienced a block of a proposal in which they were invested or isolation after exercising their right to block. However, some members of formed communities retain a commitment to the value of blocking. After 10 years as a member of Dogwood Commons Cohousing, Miko said,

> When you don't know what a real consensus is, you don't take the time to actually explore what might be going on in that person [the blocker] . . . . I've never been a part of a situation that has grown to a point where it could literally cause a person to leave. I can't buy into that. I can't be a part of a situation where I see the group violating the integrity of the individual. I've lived that way before. I had to get rid of it in myself. I just won't do it anymore. We need to facilitate so that we respect that individual's integrity. I don't care if it takes from now until hell freezes over.

Lauren expressed parallel sentiments based on her 3 years at Birch Haven: "It's really important to me how people are feeling. I care more

about feelings than about stuff. I'd rather have everybody happy than have a whatever-it-is that always seems to not matter that much to me." A willingness to wait with a decision until the concerns can be worked out seems to be a prerequisite for a block that builds community.

The rest of the pattern is revealed in examples provided by members of established communities. After the block on the patio project at Dogwood Commons, Petra observed that the block had not damaged personal relationships:

> It caused us to really look at that person and see where this came from and examine his passion surrounding it—and continue to work with him on meals and eat with him at night. It was a good thing. Something good came out of that. He seems to have integrated into the community so much. I think he really appreciated the fact that he was listened to.

The community ultimately built the patio because the opposition to it dissipated. Similarly, at Birch Haven, although a near block occurred on paving, Mark explained that the solution (which was to pave) was a better decision "in the sense that more people feel taken care of, more people feel heard by the community."

Often a blocker's concerns are not directly related to the proposal being discussed but to an internal need; the proposal has (in Naomi's words) "become a symbol of acceptance and being heard." Thus, the block functions as an invitation to probe the internal workings of a person; it offers the potential for healing of the person and, as a consequence, strengthening the community. Naomi's appreciation of this function led her to reject the idea that blocks could ever be declared invalid: "It made no sense to me that discounting a voice would benefit consensus."

The community-building potential of a block is one that some residents of Cormorant Commons were aware of but that the community seemed not to have experienced. Mickey said that she was struggling to frame a block in a positive way, "that the group is more committed to bringing all of its members along than getting a certain thing done." Louise told me that, with a facilitator's help, there was the potential for people to feel that "their deepest needs, which they haven't known how to express, can be expressed, heard, received, by the group." The potential for validation was realized, she said, "not often, not here, because we don't know how to do that." Her conclusion seems consistent with a point made by Glenn who talked about a "very interesting kind of knowing each other" in the Cormorant Commons cohousing group. He told me that during the building process, the group members came to know each other "as coworkers in extraordinarily detailed

ways," and "yet we might not know very much at all about a person's personal history." In reflecting about the role of a block to build community, I was struck by the difference between Cormorant Commons, where a block led to silence on an issue and was left to wear at the fabric of the community, and Dogwood Commons, where it more often led to an exploration of the members' fears and needs, tightening the weave in the community fabric.

Analysis

The descriptions of consensus and blocking reveal that each is a multi-layered concept. A single metaphor provides insight that is only partial; multiple metaphors make possible a more complete understanding (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Morgan, 1980). Together, the metaphors for consensus depict a process that is straightforward and practical but difficult to dissect. It may move in a fluid manner and occasionally too rapidly, but it is more likely to get stalled en route to its destination. Its typical slow pace will likely be less frustrating if it is approached with a sense of calm openness. The process may resolve differences by massaging them or battling others, but it is certain to require reworking and reshaping of ideas until finally something is produced that no group member may have imagined at the outset but with which every group member is willing to live. The product of consensus is three fold: a group decision, increased insight of group members, and firmer relationships within a group.

Inherent in the metaphors used by the participants in this research are contradictions—between consensus as active or passive, positive or negative, practical or mystical. It is likely that each of these qualities describes consensus at some times and not others because the consensus process navigates the tension between maintaining the openness of the decision process and reaching closure on the decision product. As it moves between those poles, the process itself will change. Moreover, its location in the midst of that tension is bound to generate conflicting feelings in groups, especially evident in the images of consensus as a raging river or a battle.

Although the metaphors work together to generate understanding of the consensus process, separately they reflect differences in views of different individuals and communities. In responding to my outline of this article, Glenn, my contact at Cormorant Commons, wrote,

> I found myself—or at least a close approximation—in every paragraph, and
> I recognized many others of our group. And it seemed to me that we change

our metaphorical perceptions from one decision to another sometimes. But for me, there are metaphors I recognize as true for others that I can't imagine would ever hold for me.

After reading a draft of the full article, he added, "I am convinced that differences in metaphors are an extremely important part of the basis for disagreements about social policy." I noticed a correspondence between the communities' faith in the consensus process and the tone of the metaphors they used. However, each community mentioned experiencing some difficulties with consensus. Dogwood Commons seemed to have the most idealistic view of the consensus process. There, Anne said, "I think I was born to do consensus," and Naomi claimed to be a consensus idealist. She also admitted that the group had "gotten lazy" about consensus. Olympia explained that "as people move and new people come in, like me, they don't always know everything." Discussions on the nature of consensus are necessary in any group that gains new members who have no experience with consensus. They would also be useful in groups whose members do not share common images of the process, for such groups are likely to encounter difficulty in carrying out the process and reaching the product of consensus. In both cases, it might be productive for groups to discuss their metaphors for the process because the metaphors encode substantive information in a more indirect fashion (McClure, 1987). Therapeutic groups have found that they are able to discuss difficult issues with increased comfort through the use of metaphors (Ettin, 1986). By assessing the "kinds of values and meanings . . . hidden in the metaphor" (Cederborg, 2000, p. 233), the group can consider what kind of consensus process is best suited to its needs. Future research could explore whether such discussion of the various metaphors for consensus common in an ongoing consensus group improves group functioning and serves as a useful tool in assimilating new members into the group.

One might think that a decision rule that encourages each member to discuss ideas openly and thoroughly would create a primarily rational process. The metaphors, however, depict images that are far from neutral and, thus, reveal that emotions are inherent in the consensus process. The process itself requires a kind of emotional vulnerability, for it asks both that group members be open in expressing their needs and that they be willing to place the needs of the whole group first. It repays that vulnerability sometimes with "a joyous occasion" when consensus is reached but often with progress that is "torturously slow" and moments at which the group seems "paralyzed" or "tyrannized." To ignore these emotional components is to misunderstand the consensus process.

Emotions are heightened when consensus is blocked. Those who had invested time and effort on a proposal reported feeling "furious," "demeaned and discounted," or invalidated when the proposal was blocked. The blocker may feel a "physiological response" to pressure from the community or fear, whether stimulated by the proposal itself or by the prospect of isolation from the rest of the community. However, if a block stimulates the group to explore someone's concerns more fully, the blocker's fears can be transformed to feelings of trust and acceptance. Other group members experience a range of feelings. Olympia, reflecting on the patio decision at Dogwood Commons, did not even remember whether a block had occurred. Glenn reported that at Cormorant Commons residents' feelings about a block have included "disappointment, puzzlement, irritation, sorrow, compassion, frustration, anger." At Birch Haven, frustration with the near block of the paving project was so strong and widespread that the group amended its consensus process. One Birch Haven resident, Alicia, told me that her feelings about blocks have "moved from fear to tediousness" associated with the added work that needs to be done. In a cohousing group, that work includes not only reaching a decision but also working past the tensions that arose from the block. At Birch Haven, continued interactions in formal meetings and informal gatherings (both at the common house and in residents' private homes) allowed the group to move past its disagreements about the paving decision and to explore value differences.

Memories of blocked decisions color group members' attitudes toward the entire consensus process. Ideally, a consensus block will lead to a better ultimate outcome, both in terms of the decision itself and the ties within community. Participants in this research provided evidence that improved decision making could result from a block when (a) the blocker is perceived to have the interests of the group at heart and/or has authentic personal concerns, (b) the group is able to understand the concerns of the blocker, and (c) the group continues to talk about the problem. The absence of one or more of these conditions may lead to a block that stops the group's progress. A blocked decision can build community if the group explores members' unmet needs and attempts to find a workable solution for all group members. Issues left unresolved or undiscussed wear at the fabric of the community.

Cohousing groups have chosen to live in community with one another and to use consensus to make decisions. The images of the community-building role of both consensus and blocking may be connected with those values. Future research might explore whether groups mandated to use consensus (e.g., to resolve environmental disputes where stakeholders have

divergent interests) have similar or quite different images for the process. Future research could also use multiple independent investigators in the data analysis to provide a verification of the metaphors and themes in a different way than the participants did in this research.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to discover what consensus and a move to block consensus mean to an ongoing group committed to using consensus to make decisions that will have a meaningful impact on the group. The interviews confirm both the complexity of consensus and the pivotal role of a block in the processes of a consensus group. It is likely that no consensus group will reach unanimous consensus on the meaning of consensus. However, it is clear that disagreement has a critical role in the consensus process and that consensus has a far richer meaning than simply "talking until everyone agrees."

Notes

1. This case is described in Renz (2006). The case study reveals how consensus decision making allows a group to achieve multiple goals, some factors that create difficulties with the performance of consensus, and the limits of members' commitment to a consensus process.

2. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have argued that metaphors are not merely poetic devices but are means of structuring our perceptions, thoughts, and actions. As they explain, a metaphor entails certain conceptual relationships, so that the understanding of the concept (in this case, consensus) is revealed in the dimensions of the metaphor. The sum of entailments of a single metaphor allows the experiences related to the concept to be organized into a structured whole. Although each metaphor highlights some aspects of a concept, multiple metaphors, explored together, provide a coherent understanding of the concept. Lakoff and Johnson also argue that differences in metaphors for different individuals or groups reflect variations in the experiences and value systems—and, ultimately, the actions of individuals or groups in relation to the concept.

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