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Article

Group Cohesion and Individual Mental Health Regarding the Consensus Decision-Making Methods Associated with Three Intentional Communities

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Abstract: As distinct human societies, three unique intentional communities are investigated regarding their preferred consensus decision-making practices. It is identified that each has adopted a different form of consensus decision-making to solve potential group-wide interpersonal conflict. The individual attributes of these three consensus decision-making practices are considered, both from the perspective of maintaining group stability and in relation to individual member's mental health. The communities are a Canadian self-directed public senior elementary and secondary school, an annual English conference for those self-identifying as on the autistic spectrum, and a self-producing Korean popular music (K-pop) group. It is found that the intentional community and participants' mental health are sustained regarding each of the three consensus decision-making practices. Nevertheless, the resulting decisions generate various stresses within the communities, both as a whole and concerning the individual members. To retain group cohesion and maintain individual mental health, these stresses must be recognized and understood by participants. The novel finding of this research is that, dependent on the time available for decision-making, and the members' perspective adopted, intentional communities might practice more than one form of consensus decision-making and still support both group cohesion and individual mental health, maintaining the democracy of these distinct societies.

Keywords: intentional communities; consensus decision-making; interpersonal conflict; mental health; self-directed; autistic spectrum; K-pop; group cohesion; democracy

1. Introduction

Human societies are constructed to a significant extent dependent on the geographic location and familial circumstances into which its members are born; unless individual members have the resources and inclination to migrate based on actual choices they have made, societies develop independently of people's personal values [1]. To this extent, although intentional communities—as distinct societies based on shared personal values—have always existed, they remain rare [2]. This is a problem because positive mental health is in part based on the ability of individuals to live based on what they personally value [3]. It is because they are unusual in supporting shared personal values, how intentional communities are sustained and the manner in which they contribute to the mental health of their members through the methods of decision-making they adopt is of interest.

In common among intentional communities is their attempt at cooperation within the context of a highly competitive culture [4]. They have been defined in a number ways. Twenty years ago, they were characterized 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” [5] (p. 15). More recently, the definitions offered include a group of people that, “form for a specific agreed-upon purpose and live in close proximity to achieve their desired end” [6] (p. 181); and those “who have chosen to live (and sometimes work) together for some common purpose beyond that of tradition, personal relationship or family ties” [4]

(p. 268). What is relevant regarding the third definition in contrast to the first and second is it recognizes that an intentional community may go beyond people cohabitating, as they might involve a working community. Similar among the three definitions is that they each identify the importance of what is referred to by one as “shared values” (or something mutually agreed on), another as “an agreed-upon purpose”, and the third as a “common purpose” representing a particular, community-accepted, component. The point for all is that without these shared values, mutual agreements, or agreed purpose in common, there is nothing intentional identifying the community.

Regarding decision-making, the defining feature of intentional communities is a rejection of the idea that one person can represent others—all members must be involved in decision-making, usually through consensus [7]. In its most basic form, consensus decision-making necessitates that everyone affected by a decision take part in deciding the course before any action is taken. By using consensus decision-making, everyone’s needs are taken into account in some manner [8] and talking-over and interrupting others is minimized [7]. In this way, decisions are those acceptable to all participants affected by the outcome—unlike in decision-making by voting for different options, where only those identified as winners are satisfied with the result. As over a decade ago losing in a vote was found to be the primary reason for a lack of satisfaction with democracy [9], the potential value of consensus decision-making for other societies is noteworthy.

The purpose of this study is to investigate and compare the consensus decision-making practices adhered to by three unique intentional communities—one designed for learning, one organized for socializing, and one supporting group music creation—each adopting a different form of consensus decision-making to solve potential community-wide interpersonal conflict. These are intentional communities that can be considered a success in that they continue to fulfill the community’s moral claim as a dependent variable [6]. Each intentional community’s consensus decision-making practice will be considered, both from the perspective of maintaining group stability and in relation to individual mental health. It will be recognized that the resulting decisions from these different methods put various stresses on each community as a whole and on the individual members. These stresses require identification and understanding by participants if group cohesion and individual mental health are to be maintained. The intentional communities are a Canadian self-directed public senior elementary and secondary school—Alpha II Alternative School, an annual English conference for those self-identifying as on the autistic spectrum—Autescape, and a self-producing Korean popular (K-pop) music group—Stray Kids.

1.1. Alpha II Alternative School

Alpha II Alternative is a Canadian grades 7–12 Toronto District School Board alternative school. Founded over the 2006–2007 school year by nine parents of students attending the primary and junior elementary ALPHA Alternative School (the author being one of those parents), learning is self-directed in a community based on consensus, where every person’s perspective is involved in making school-wide decisions. There are no grades, no marks, and no report cards. Application for post-secondary education is based on a student portfolio [10]. Enrolment is through a continuous intake process [11]. Alpha II’s core values remain those the founding parents created when the school was approved by the Board in 2007 [12]. What is distinct about the Alpha II program regarding self-direction is: (1) learners determine the direction of their learning, (2) this direction is based on what is personally valued, (3) learners evaluate when and how they meet their goals of learning, (4) upholding self-directed learning is paramount to the structure of the program, (5) educators act as mentors rather than instructors, and (6) resources needed for learning are defined by the self-directed learner [13] (p. 261).

Concerning its form of consensus decision-making: (1) all members of Alpha II are encouraged to listen carefully to others’ points of view, (2) when making shared school-related decisions the intent is to find a time and place to incorporate what each person values, (3) the aim of decision-making and conflict resolution is finding win/win solutions for shared resources and goals, (4) every member of the Alpha II community is respected as a person who is fully able to direct their own learning, add their point of view to the consensus, and create a welcoming learning environment that

is safe for all, and (5) conflict resolution is achieved through a process involving mentees, mentors, and/or community members, initiated by mentees [14].

At Alpha II, any decision affecting the group as a whole is decided by having those who are present the day the decision is made sit in a circle and each member, one-by-one, stating their opinion on the matter. If any person does not have an opinion, they can opt to “pass”. Points of view are voiced going around the circle until a way is found to accomplish what each person values in making the decision. As an example, if the decision to be made is how to use funds for the school and some people would like to use them for purchasing computer software, others want to buy sewing materials, and still others want to acquire kitchen utensils, the discussion will continue until all believe that their interests will be met with the decision. This may include dividing up the funds, finding additional funds from another line item of the budget, or not purchasing anything until all the necessary funds are available to pay for what each person values. The main point is that everyone believe they have not had to compromise what it is that they personally value in making the decision. Those not present on the day the decision is made may opt to have the decision reconsidered if they surmise their point of view has not been taken into consideration by the result of the consensus decision-making. The process thus begins again until all are satisfied with the result.

1.2. *Autscape*

Autscape is an organization based in England designed to support and encourage interaction among European individuals who self-identify as on the autistic spectrum. Initiated in 2004 [15], Autscape became a corporation in 2010 and registered charity in 2011 [16]. Since 2005, its primary activity is a yearly three-day conference that has been held in various locations in England [17],[18]) where those self-identifying as on the autistic spectrum can come together to socialize in a manner that supports their neurodivergence. It is a conference created for and by autistic people. Decisions in the corporation itself are made by unanimity—a form of consensus decision-making—as stated in section 11 of the group’s Memorandum & Articles of Association [19]. However, what is of interest for the purpose of this study is not the decision-making of the corporation, it is the form of decision-making promoted at the annual conference—a conference that has historically been frequently cited for its significance in increasing feelings of wellbeing and belonging in autistic individuals [20]. There, the autistic needs of individuals are supported in a number of ways; most significantly, the procedure that has been developed for facilitating decisions regarding social interaction for which a colored badge system has been created, indicating in what way participants will permit their own socialization.

For those who do not want to interact with others, they select to wear a red badge. Those who want to interact, but not unless they have given the other person permission, wear a yellow badge. If the participant wants to interact with others, but has trouble initiating, the green badge worn indicates permission to begin interaction with them. Finally, if the person has a white badge or does not wear one, this identifies that they are able to regulate their own interaction. Furthermore, if the badge has a black dot, it means that these people don’t wish to be recorded in photographs or videos. It is very important to the event that everyone respect and act according to the color and any black circle of the interaction badges [21].

For Autscape, socializing decisions are made by participants identifying the color of each person’s badge that they wear at the annual Autscape event. To determine whether or not any participant interacts with another, each person must follow the information supplied by the color of the individual’s choice as represented on their badge. In this way, decisions to socialize are made silently through color identification, once the meaning of the color is understood. What is unacceptable in this intentional community constituted for social interaction is not following the intention of the badge’s color when choosing to interact.

1.3. *Stray Kids*

Stray Kids is the name of a self-producing K-pop group of eight young men (originally nine, one of the members left the group in 2019 [22]). The group was formed by JYP Entertainment in 2017 as

a result of a reality TV show with the same name [23] from participants personally selected by the then 20-year-old leader of the group [24]. Debuting as with their first album in 2018, Stray Kids has had its three most recent albums enter at No. 1 on the Billboard 200 album chart, a chart that ranks the most popular albums of the week in the U.S. based on multi-metric consumption as measured in equivalent album units [25]. October 2023, Stray Kids was named Next Generation Leaders by *Time* magazine for their international success, global fan-base, and goal of “continuously pioneering new [musical] subjects to have their music be recognized as a ‘Stray Kids’ genre” [26]. Known for their humility, earnestness, and empowerment [27], Stray Kids group members depend on their close bond with each other and with their fans to maintain a continuing sense of what they describe as “family” [28].

When making group-wide decisions, maintaining their close connection to permit the successful continuation of their group with all the original members is the primary focus. As such, although one of the group members is known for the principled approach he prefers to take regarding decision-making [28], when determining daily living decisions, Stray Kids have adopted to use luck, most often producing the decision result through members playing the necessary number of rounds of the game Rock Paper Scissors, to find the winner (or loser). Since group cohesion is of most importance, once the game is over, members quickly accept the result, regardless of the outcome. The importance of this game for their decision-making strategy has been referenced in the self-composed recordings of two of their songs, one penned and recorded by an individual group member [29], and the other created by the self-producing team of the group—3Racha [28]—and recorded by the group as a whole [30].

As an intentional community, Stray Kids is primarily concerned with making their own decisions based on each member’s personal interests and abilities in writing, producing, performing, and promoting their music and their group. Yet, any decisions most importantly must be ones that maintain the cohesiveness of the group. In this regard, Stray Kids as an intentional community that differs from the two other intentional communities considered as the other communities primarily are concerned with ensuring that self-direction based on personal values is paramount compared with group cohesiveness. What this means for Stray Kids is that decisions requiring a quick resolution in daily living matters are to be made by luck, most often using the game Rock Paper Scissors and that self-direction in these instances comes second to maintaining the close family-like bond of the group.

2. Materials and Methods

The materials to be gathered for this study are those from primary sources, representing first-hand information. Regarding Alpha II Alternative School, these will include information from the school’s website [31] and information this author as a co-founder of the school has made publicly available regarding the founding and continuation of the school up until the present time [10,12,13,32]). With respect to Autscape, the primary sources that will be reviewed will pertain to the organization’s website [33], its articles of incorporation [16] and an article written by one of the founders of Autscape [15] providing personal reflections. Lastly, the primary sources that will be investigated regarding Stray Kids will be the videos made by the group available on YouTube [34] regarding episodes of different series they have recorded over the years. These will include particular shows referring to the playing of Rock Paper Scissors to make decisions [35–38] among the full list of Stray Kids YouTube videos available to the public.

The research methodology to be used is comparative historical research based on first-hand accounts. The aim of this comparative historical research is interpreting present social problems through reflective thinking regarding the discovery of past trends in events, facts and attitudes [39]. As such, present day understandings in comparing communities are studied with reference to those of the past. Historical research methodology is the application of scientific method to historical problems based on these historical records. It involves an evaluation of materials recognizing that historical facts are not reproducible as are laboratory observations [37].

Although the creation of comparative histories may use a range of physical materials for assessment, to permit this study to be comparable among the three intentional communities, only those primary documents that are publicly available through websites, publications, or YouTube videos will be examined. Especially regarding the documents pertaining to Alpha II (for which the author is in possession of many private documents), the aim is to avoid personal bias as an influence in the research procedure.

3. Results

The results of this historical method with respect to the materials gathered for each of the three intentional communities follow. Based on an interpretation of the information gathered, the results are divided here into six different categories regarding the consensus decision-making practice of each: Time to decision; Decision satisfaction; Supporting values; Group, main concern; Priorities understood; and Reconsideration (see Table 1).

Table 1. Features of Three Intentional Communities in Practicing Three Different Forms of Consensus Decision-Making.

Feature	Alpha II	Autscape	Stray Kids
Time to decision	long	short	very short
Decision Satisfaction	high	mostly high	acceptable
Supporting values	high	high	random
Group, main concern	no	no	yes
Priorities understood	somewhat	largely	yes
Reconsideration	supported	supported	not supported

3.1. Time to Decision

The time it takes to make a decision in each of the three intentional communities differs considerably.

3.1.1. Alpha II

Given that creating a win/win solution is most important to the Alpha II community, coming to a decision that is acceptable to all may take a very long time and might involve more than one meeting. This extended time is often exasperating for Alpha II members [32]; however, they are willing to endure the length of time knowing that, in the end, a way will be found to do what each values. For those who are not willing to take the time to make a decision, they either “pass” during the meeting, or they decide not to participate regarding making the particular decision. What this means is that this member of Alpha II does not consider the result of the one decision to actually affect what they personally value sufficiently to endure the lengthy process of decision-making.

3.1.2. Autscape

As each person participating in Autscape wears a badge indicating their preference for initiating socialization, any person wanting to talk with another merely has to identify the color of the person’s badge to determine if and/or how approaching them is acceptable. The time to decision-making is thus the time it takes to first learn what the color coding means and then to identify the badge color. This may be problematic for those attending the meeting who have poor comprehension skills or are colorblind [15]. As well, since participants have the option of changing the color of their badge as the event proceeds, the other time limitation is that on each separate encounter of an individual during the conference people must check to ensure that the color of the badge remains the same as it was the previous time the two individuals interacted.

3.1.3. Stray Kids

All that is necessary to make a quick group decision in this intentional community is for one group member to call for the need to use Rock Paper Scissors. Once this call is made, there is no disagreement regarding the need for Rock Paper Scissors—all accept that this is the way the decision will be made. As there are eight members of the group, it may require a few rounds of the game to produce the final winner. Once the winner is determined, this result is accepted by all group members, unless there was some misreading of the particular throw by someone, as is sometimes witnessed [37]. In this case, another round of the game is played to determine the final result.

3.2. *Decision Satisfaction*

The decision satisfaction relates to the level of satisfaction members of each intentional community have with respect to the results of the consensus decision-making.

3.2.1. Alpha II

Regarding the decision itself, all members participating in the consensus decision-making must be satisfied with the results of the decision or the process continues. Those who have opted not to participate in the process accept the results. However, if it is later determined that some who have not participated are unsatisfied with the decision, the process will begin again until those who are not satisfied become so.

3.2.2. Autscape

Satisfaction with the results of the decision people make to socialize with another or not will depend on individuals interpreting the color of the badge correctly. It will also be limited by how well the participants know what it is they desire regarding socializing—something they may not know until they have begun to socialize with others. This is why the option is always available at the event for participants to change the color of their badges. Unless an equivocating participant is able to correct this problem as the event continues, they may not be satisfied with the decisions people make in socializing with them.

3.2.3. Stray Kids

Individual satisfaction is not relevant for group decisions that result from playing Rock Paper Scissors. As such, it is normally the case that the only group member who is personally satisfied with the result is the winner—that is, unless the “winner” is having to do an activity that no one wants to do, such as carry groceries for all from the convenience store [37], then the winner is the least satisfied personally. Since the results are decided by luck, all members accept that there will be times that when they win and other instances when they lose in making these group decisions.

3.3. *Supporting Values*

Whether or not the outcome of the consensus decision-making supports the personal values of the intentional community is relevant to consider.

3.3.1. Alpha II

As people have joined the Alpha II community supporting its two pillars of self-directed learning in a community based on consensus decision-making where each person’s personal values are taken into consideration, the results of this consensus decision-making are, by design, those that support the personal values of each group member.

3.3.2. Autscape

Those people self-identifying as autistic join Autscape because they want to be part of an intentional community that values their neurodivergent differences with respect to socialization

during the annual conference. As these differences are often paramount in defining the individual as autistic, the decision-making process is entirely focused on what the participants personally value.

3.3.3. Stray Kids

The group members of Stray Kids have joined this intentional community because they believe they want to be K-pop idols and know that this takes talent, work, dedication, time, honesty, humility and, primarily, the desire to work as a member of a group rather than as an individual. As such, when group decisions have the potential to harm any of these important aspects for group cohesiveness, the group members agree to use luck to determine the outcome, most often with the use of Rock Paper Scissors. In this way, they are willing to accept decisions for the good of the group that they may not personally value, as group cohesion is a greater personal value for each than self-interest.

3.4. *Group, Main Concern*

What is meant by “group, main concern” is whether the primary concern of making the decision is maintaining the cohesiveness of the group.

3.4.1. Alpha II

What is most important for Alpha II is making each person as an individual feel that what they personally value is important to the group. However, the cohesiveness of the group members as a group comes only from this consideration. This means if some group member of this intentional community decides to leave Alpha II it is considered a personal decision outside the role of the school to influence their desire in wanting to leave. With respect to the group, the main concern is that the school continues, not that any particular individual member remains with the school.

3.4.2. Autscape

For those who self-identify as autistic, it is difficult for them, as autistic individuals, to consider the Autscape intentional community as anything more than a chance meeting of a group of individuals, however much they desire to socialize. The value of the group as a group of particular people is not especially relevant during the yearly conference. However, this should not be interpreted as diminished social motivation; it is merely as an aspect identifying their autism [40].

3.4.3. Stray Kids

The priority for Stray Kids as an intentional community is group cohesiveness. As a result, all group decisions made by Rock Paper Scissors are accepted because doing so keeps the group intact, even though, personally, group members may not prefer the result.

3.5. *Priorities Understood*

When priorities are understood in the consensus decision-making process it means that, when making decisions, the importance of a particular decision is prioritized in the decision-making process in relation to the goals of the intentional community before a decision is made.

3.5.1. Alpha II

Each group-wide decision at Alpha II is decided by going around the circle and asking each person their point of view on the matter, then continuing the process until everyone believes that the result supports what they personally value. As such, there is no prioritizing of the decisions to be made. The making of all group-wide decisions entails the same process.

3.5.2. Autscape

To the extent that each member of this intentional community may select a badge pertaining to what it is they value related to deciding how and with whom they want to socialize, these members

can prioritize what is important to them in their badge selection. However, if they are unclear on their priorities in selecting their badge then their priorities may not be considered as they intend. What cannot be prioritized is the value of any particular color of badge per se. However, for each personal interaction, it is important for every individual to know and prioritize with whom they want to associate given the color of badge any certain participant wears.

3.5.3. Stray Kids

All decisions are initially prioritized in relation to whether they are intrinsic to what is personally important to the group members (and thus a personal choice) or if the matter is one that pertains to the group as a whole. If related to the group as a group, it is considered by the group members to require the use of luck to determine the result. This is normally accomplished by playing the necessary rounds of Rock Paper Scissors.

3.6. *Reconsideration*

Whether or not the results of the consensus decision-making can be reconsidered is a matter that differs for each intentional community.

3.6.1. Alpha II

Given that creating a win/win situation with consensus decision-making is valued highly at Alpha II, reconsideration of the outcome of decisions made is always an option unless the decision made was time-dependent and is no longer relevant. If reconsideration is requested, meetings are held until each participant believes that their point of view is taken into consideration.

3.6.2. Autscape

If any member of this intentional community believes that what they value in socialization is not being appropriately realized at the event, they have the option to choose another badge to indicate what they want from socialization, and they may change their badge as often as they prefer. On the other hand, if the member believes that their badge color is not being respected by the other participants, this member can bring their concerns to the organizing committee for an investigation with the aim to reconsider the results of the unacceptable interaction [15]

3.6.3. Stray Kids

In very few instances is there a reconsideration of the results of Rock Paper Scissors in making a group decision. The only time that this might happen is if the hand sign made by a group member was misread by others, as happens at times [37]. Even if for some reason the results of the game have randomly meant that a particular group member too frequently has had to do something that no one prefers to do (such as carry the coats of other members [34]) all accept that this is what happens when luck is used to make these consensus-based decisions, although an individual negatively affected may not prefer the result of any particular game that is played.

4. Discussion

This discussion will focus on three elements. The first relates to the extent of each of the three methods of consensus decision-making to support the continuation of the group. The second concerns consideration of the mental health of the participants in adhering to the particular consensus decision-making model for each of the three intentional communities. The final aspect to be discussed will be the limitations to this research that has been conducted.

4.1. *Group Cohesion*

To varying degrees, each of the three intentional communities that are the focus of this study requires a high degree of commitment with the aim to produce social cohesion and stability—

recognized as a defining feature of intentional communities [7]. Nevertheless, what this high degree of commitment means to the three intentional communities differs.

4.1.1. Alpha II

Alpha II Alternative School is a public school within the largest school board in Canada [41]. As such, it represents one option available from the board among many, including both standardized learning and various alternative schools [42]. For this reason, it is not an aim of the Alpha II to ensure that any individual student remains committed to continuing their enrolment in the school. As an educational institution, what suits any particular student best is that which is supported by the school as part of the board. What does define group cohesion for Alpha II is for all those associated with the school to be willing and able to support the two pillars of the school of self-directed learning, and community based on consensus decision-making. To do its best to ensure that all those involved in the school adhere to these pillars, there is a detailed and multifaceted application process for potential students (referred to as mentees), and detailed interview process for potential teachers (mentors). Nevertheless, the school does not presume to be the final arbitrator for who should be permitted to be part of Alpha II as a public school. The final decision is left to the potential members. Therefore, the success of the decision-making process in any one year will depend on how many of those involved in the school truly support the two pillars of the school.

4.1.2. Autscape

According to one of this intentional community's founders, "Inclusivity is a central principle of Autscape" [15] (p. 114). As such, what group cohesion means to Autscape is its continuing to be the type of event where all are welcome. This necessitates making Autscape accessible to those who are neurodivergent through the use of the badge system to silently promote consensus decision-making during the conference. Although applauded for this aim, nevertheless, in this focus of inclusivity, Autscape has been criticized both for not being fully wheelchair accessible and for being too expensive for some to attend. The founder has acknowledged that neither of these problems associated with accessibility has been fully solved [15] (p. 114). Another difficulty with respect to group cohesion that the founder recognizes is the minimal success Autscape has had in attracting non-verbal, and less sociable people to the conference [15] (p. 116). Yet, the founder is willing to accept that Autscape cannot please everyone since "many autistic needs are mutually incompatible, even paradoxical" [15] (p. 116), and "one of the keys to Autscape's long term success has probably been that it has been a democratic organization from the start" [15] (p. 119).

4.1.3. Stray Kids

22 October 2023, during their 5 dome concert in Seoul, Stray Kids had the most recent opportunity for their leader to express his dream that the members of Stray Kids "stay together for a long, long time" [43], a sentiment to which other the group members nodded in agreement on stage. This enduring desire for the members to remain together relates to their enacting Rock Paper Scissors most often as the decision-making method used to solve daily living matters quickly—ones that otherwise might produce possible conflict—in a manner that not only retains but reinforces group cohesion. As an example, the first time the group conducted a live broadcast to interact with their fans during the summer of 2019 produced two episodes of the program Stray Kids Inkigayo Check-in LIVE, each approximately 18 minutes in length. After introducing their new album during the first episode [36], at 7:45 in the video, the initial game they play is Rock Paper Scissors, demonstrating the importance of this game to the group. In the second video [37], beginning at 4:11, the members are told they are playing a game to test their strength—this is because only half the members will be permitted to eat the food prepared for them. How they will be tested is by again by playing Rock Paper Scissors. What is notable here is that even though all want to eat, those who lost appear happily willing to endure watching the others eat. From the video it is evident the most important outcome

is that the group remains cohesive and supportive of one another—the members referring to their relationship as “brothers” in more than one instance during the live broadcast.

4.2. *Mental Health*

The ways in which the consensus decision-making of these three intentional communities affects the mental health of the communities’ participants will be noted—both with respect to enhancing positive mental health and creating negative mental health.

4.2.1. Alpha II

For those individual members of the Alpha II community who are committed to the two pillars of Alpha II of self-directed learning in a community based on consensus decision-making, the ability to provide their point of view at decision-making meetings is important to them in supporting their mental health. An often-asked question about Alpha II is, how does being able to make decisions in this way benefit them in life [13]? The importance of community members having the ability to tell their own story and know themselves is the most relevant outcome with respect to this form of decision-making in a self-directed learning environment. What Alpha II is able to provide is encouraging and reinforcing positive mental health that community members “can maintain throughout their life’s pursuits” [13] (p. 208). Nevertheless, for those students, parents, and staff who are not committed to the two pillars of the school—or who have overwhelming difficulty waiting their turn to speak and/or listening to others—it has been noted over the years by the author that they find the long process of decision-making frustrating and infuriating. To diminish their negative feelings, some Alpha II members historically have tried to change the philosophy of decision-making at the school to be based on non-consensual principles. The proposed methods for decision-making in this regard have included majority rule voting and no one strongly disagreeing with a decision [32]. As the decision-making process of the school is one of its founding pillars that has been continually maintained over the years, it is the group member who is against this form of consensus decision-making who ultimately chooses to leave the school rather than the school changing its decision-making process. If the members of the school who suggest these changes instead choose to continue on at the school, they are noted for continually questioning the founding vision of the school [32]. For these students, parents, and staff, negative mental health is the result and can affect the entire school environment in any one school year.

4.2.2. Autscape

Many attendees of Autscape are noted to return to the conference year after year because they feel it is the best place for them to truly feel that their needs are taken into consideration in socialization [15]. In large part, this is because they are expected to take responsibility for communicating their needs and working out strategies for getting their needs met [44]. Nevertheless, it has been recognized that what well-being means to adults on the autistic spectrum is not well understood as its measure has depended on tools that have been designed for neurotypicals [20]. Therefore, a study of mental health in the autistic population is of particular importance. In a 2018 study of attendees of Autscape, the value of the badge system used for consensus decision-making was reinforced by the finding that 59 % of these autistic respondents reported difficulty in communicating with their physician during a consultation ‘all the time’ or ‘frequently’ compared with 12% of non-autistic respondents—with 78% of the autistic individuals noting that it is anxiety that makes it harder to communicate [45]. In this way, the use of the Autscape badge system might to some degree be transferrable to interactions the autistic person has in particular with their physician to improve communication, simultaneously promoting positive mental health. What is problematic is the extent that the badge system may not be transferable to the clinical setting, as those involved in the clinical setting are outside the intentional community of Autscape. To this effect, the badge system originated by Autscape may have a limited value. Recognizing the limitation of this

method in their interactions with their physicians may promote negative mental health in those who attend Autscape events, for example, in relation to their primary healthcare relationship.

4.2.3. Stray Kids

Although all members of Stray Kids are willing to accept the outcome of Rock, Paper, Scissors when it is played, and they have personally made the decision that they support the group over their own self-interest, this does not mean that each member individually feels content with the outcome. One member in particular, known as the “man of principles” [46], has clearly voiced that he does not like to play Rock Paper Scissors [47], stating that he seems to always lose. His propensity for losing the game has been recorded, including his obvious dislike of a result in 2018 when he lost twice and had to carry his and other members’ winter coats all the way up a long flight of stairs [35]. Another member who does not like to lose in Rock Paper Scissors has a reaction to loss of finding various ways of being humorously negative regarding his plight. An example is in 2023, when he had to carry a heavy bag of ice cream for all the group members from the convenience store to their vacation home after a loss in Rock Paper Scissors [37]. The game is played at 17:38. When this group member loses, he first pretends to run away and then, after accepting the result, he acts as if the bag is far heavier than it is. When the others start leaving without him, he mock-cries. Finally, he decides to walk very slowly. The others leave him behind. He speeds up playfully claiming “No loyalty, just leaving me like that”. Once he catches up, he softly hits the arm of one of the members relating, “this is the punch of loyalty”. Both the reactions of these two Stray Kids members to losing in Rock Paper Scissors demonstrate that they are frustrated by the game and endure its results for the greater good, not because they endorse the outcome. As such, when putting their own interests first, at least these two members at least temporarily experience negative mental health from the method of consensus decision-making if they lose in Rock Paper Scissors.

4.3. Limitations

Although the strength of this historical method is that it does not depend on secondary sources for assessment and, as such, the ability to recognize what has been identified by this research is open to all other researchers who may want to investigate these sources referenced, there are limitations that can be identified regarding this assessment.

The primary limitation of this study relates to an imbalance among how materials were gathered for Alpha II Alternative School in comparison with both Autscape and Stray Kids. In the case of Alpha II, the author is one of the co-founders of this intentional community and has been an integral part of its development continuously since 2006. As such, the author has greater assurance of the veracity of the interpretation that has been presented in relation to the documents assessed that are associated with the community. In this regard, the author has the least knowledge of the Autscape community, in only becoming aware of this intentional community upon being emailed an article on Autscape [48] summer 2023. Regarding Stray Kids, the author developed an interest in this intentional community’s decision-making process in 2021. Since that time, the author has viewed the large majority of the YouTube videos associated with the group. The purpose has been to witness (and compare with Alpha II) how it is that their intentional community is able to have such a strong bond in making decisions by Rock Paper Scissors while, at the same time, maintaining what they value individually with respect to their roles as creative musicians and performing entertainers. As such, the confidence level regarding what is known of each intentional community is not equivalent and, therefore, represents an important limitation.

Another limitation is that, as intentional communities are represented by participation by all members rather than representation in decision-making, the author was not able to know the views of all members historically associated with each intentional community. Although it is understandable that this could not be done, the individual views of participants may have produced a different result than has been recorded. For example, although the eight members of Stray Kids are, still in 2023, noticeably bound to each other and the goals of the group, early in the group’s history, one of the members left the group for personal reasons [22]. What those reasons were has never been

revealed. However, there was likely significant interpersonal conflict that led to the break of this member with the group. Knowing how Stray Kids were able to get through this period would be valuable with respect to understanding their group cohesion with respect to consensus decision-making; yet, only a week after ninth group member left, the others acted on camera as if the group had always had only eight members [49].

5. Conclusions

Regarding consensus decision-making in intentional communities, there are two important conclusions arising from this study. The first is that there is more than one way to undertake consensus decision-making in such communities to sustain them while supporting the mental health of the community members. The second is that the method of consensus decision-making the community members select requires both understanding the relationship between the particular moral commitment that is the dependent variable identifying the community and the personal values of the participants. Whatever the method of consensus decision-making selected, it must be one that permits the community to continue in relation to its core values and, at the same time, be one that each individual member is able to accept. The major determining features regarding the method of consensus decision-making selected are found to be the amount of time available to make the decision, and whether the community is primarily focused on supporting personal values or ensuring group member continuity. The implication is that, although the three intentional communities examined each upheld one method as that which they turned to for decision-making, it is possible for an intentional community to opt for different methods of consensus decision-making depending on the time available as long as the method selected corresponds with the community's moral commitment and the focus in relation to group continuity and individual personal values. That it is possible to consider more than one method of consensus decision-making for any particular intentional community is a new finding from this historical research. This may be valuable to intentional communities contemplating modifications in their consensus decision-making processes in settling potential interpersonal conflicts for the purpose of ensuring their continued satisfaction with democracy.

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